

Shahrazad Perceived the Dawn A Tale of Grain

By Paul Cox



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Chapter One The Storyteller's Tale

ON THE FIRST NIGHT

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"The next port above El Kateef of any note on this coast is that of Graine ... This is a port of some importance, seated in a fine bay; and the town is large and populous, though the sandy desert presses close upon its walls, and no vegetation is to be seen around it, within the range of human view. It seems always to have preserved its independence too ... and they still bear the reputation of being the freest and bravest people throughout the Gulf."

--James Silk Buckingham,

1816

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"There is no help for it; I must crucify a man who sells conserve of pomegranate-grains lacking pepper!" Ali stood in the aisle of the Sultan Center supermarket, scrutinizing a jar of some sort of preserve. It wasn't even pomegranate actually, something called blackcurrant, but he was fairly certain it didn't contain any pepper. Imported from Italy or someplace. Another shopper shot him an odd glance as she passed by with a laden cart. Ali shot her one right back, and explained, "It's a quote from the *Thousand Nights and a Night*. There was this old man who sold sweets, but he was really a runaway prince from Cairo, and..." She didn't stop, just continued on a bit faster down the aisle. Ali put the jar back on the shelf upside-down and stood contemplating the rows of jam, trying to remember what he had come here to buy. He flipped a few more jars over as his mind wandered to other topics. Grocery stores were not good places for him--fun, sure, but actually buying anything was the tricky bit. How long would the contents of one of these jars actually remain in edible condition, in a best-case climactic scenario? Years? Decades? How about out in the desert? Snapping back to his present situation, Ali realized that he had turned every jar on the shelf on its lid. No mean feat, really--there must be hundreds of the things. He slipped around the corner before anyone noticed. Surely it wouldn't actually harm the contents, but he still felt just a bit as if he had done something wrong, violated the supermarket code.

He wandered down the next row, attention roaming from one brand of *laban* to the next. No idea anymore what he'd come here to buy. Probably nothing, just with a general intention of getting something to eat. He hadn't had much of

an *Iftar* meal tonight. Did he feel like drinking an entire litre of *laban*? No, of course not. Why was he still looking at it? Giving up on the whole food and shopping issues as a lost cause, he jumped on the cart-guard-rail and walked along its length in the direction of the doors through which the outside world could be dimly seen. The store was pretty dead right now; most shoppers came in during daylight hours this month to stock up for their lavish Ramadan dinners at sunset. By now--he checked his Russian pocket watch-- at almost midnight, the cafes and restaurants were the places to be. From now until the morning light, getting in that last-minute bite to eat. He could care less about the cafes, the coffee and the *sheeshas*, but he really ought to find something to keep him going until morning. An odd dilemma for one walking through a huge supermarket, true, but some imperceptible force was keeping him from being able to make a single purchase here. The tastiest food product on Earth could not part him from his money while he was in this supermarket and in this sort of mood.

He stopped once more on his way out to poke the bread for a few seconds, humming loudly to himself. His greatest weakness of all it was, poking the bread. It wasn't his fault. The bread was asking for it. He gave it one final angry poke--perhaps denting the loaf for good--and tried to storm out of the store. He couldn't count even this action as a success; the clerks didn't even notice. He needed to work on his storming technique, and having to wait for the automatic doors to open didn't help either. Outside, he squeezed behind the row of shopping carts lining the front wall of the shop and retrieved his worn leather briefcase from where he had stashed it earlier.

He squeezed back out onto the sidewalk amidst several curious glances. The brightly lit Salem Al-Mubarak Street

fronting the Sultan Center was as packed as the supermarket itself was empty. This was the heart of Salmiya, the most happening district of Kuwait as far as the younger crowd was concerned. 'younger crowd', as in, well, his age. For some reason Ali himself didn't find it particularly happening, or hip, or anything else. He scowled at the strategically-positioned row of expensive motorcycles and the coffee shop behind them on the other side of the street. Strange, harsh music throbbed forth from the crowded establishment. Enough of this place. Ali hurriedly turned towards the western length of Salem Al-Mubarak Street and started walking to... somewhere.

He walked far down the street, towards the coast and the outskirts of Salmiya. As the music faded in the distance, the mysterious force projected on his soul by the Sultan Center seemed to fade behind him as well. The heavy briefcase swung at his side and he began to whistle. The long pointed sleeve of his *thob shillabat* on his suitcase-arm worked itself free from its careful wrapping and trailed behind him in the slight night-time breeze. He stopped to unbind the other sleeve as well--it was warm enough out tonight, a bit warmer than usual for November. It was nice that Ramadan came earlier this year. Last year it had been absolutely freezing at this time of night. Of course, it would be much colder out in the desert, without concrete covering every surface and holding onto the sun's heat for hours on end.

Ali crossed another traffic-laden street and hopped over a railing surrounding a section of road work. He climbed through a couple sections of the concrete pipe that was being laid, getting the sleeves of his *thob shillabat* a bit dusty for his indulgence. It wasn't the most practical garment for some things, he had to admit. And even less fashionable than practical these days. In fact one might truthfully call it a complete anachronism--the body-length

cotton shirt with its wide triangular sleeves had been seldom seen outside the cultural museums of the Gulf states for the last few decades. Its more modern-looking cousin, the *dishdashah*, had won out completely in this country. Ali had only ever met one old man who still wore the *thob*, and that had been a few years ago at the Friday Market. The one he was now wearing he'd had specially tailored by a Filipino downtown, using a picture in a library book as a guide.

He spotted another human being up ahead, silhouetted in the stream of headlights. It was a bored-looking man selling dates from a little folding table on the side of the road. "Peace be upon you", Ali offered. Here was the answer to his pangs of hunger--dates, the most concentrated source of energy known to Kuwait. In the old days, dates were placed on nutritional par with meat, and considered a meal in themselves. The pearl divers would go out for the entire day in their *dhows* with nothing but a handful to sustain them, so surely he could make it through to breakfast with a quarter kilo of the things.

"And upon you be peace", grumbled the date merchant in a pronounced Syrian accent.

"A quarter kilogram of your ripest please, my good Damascene. No, on second thought, better make it a half kilo. I've been walking a long ways, and who but God is to say how much farther I must walk this night?"

The man raised an eyebrow, then shrugged and began filling a small paper bag.

"I really must be careful now", Ali continued, "for these dates remind me a bit too much of a story from the *Thousand Nights and a Night*. Are you familiar with the tale of the trader and the *jinni*?"

The man lowered his eyebrow, raised the other one, and shook his head.

"A trader of great wealth was traveling to another city, and he stopped along the

road to eat some dates such as these. He sat down next to a well, and tossed the stone of his date down it. All at once a monstrous *jinni* appeared out of the well amidst a cloud of smoke. It brandished a mighty sword and bellowed, 'Stand up that I may slay thee, even as thou slewest my son!'. To make a long story short, the *jinni's* son at the bottom of the well had been struck full in the breast by the date stone and killed. So the *jinni* killed the trader in revenge."

The Syrian paused, holding out the filled bag of dates. "What? That's it?"

"What else is there to tell?"

"That story doesn't make any sense. What's the message?"

"There is no message, people like the trader can't be helped by morals and fables. For no matter how careful we are, we all toss date stones now and again." Ali selected a date from his bag and ate it, throwing the stone over his shoulder to illustrate. He waited a few seconds, listening, strangely disappointed.

Chapter Two The Smuggler's Tale

*ring-riiing-riiing-ring ... riüing-riüing-riüing ...
ring-riiing-ring ... riüing-ring-riüing...*

There it was, the secret doorbell ring. Whoever it was sure had good timing--Katie was just pulling a fresh batch of pies out of the oven. She set the tray on the counter and hurried to the front gate. "Looking for a little *Iftar* treat?" This must be a new guy, short, bald and chubby, definitely a Brit.

"Yes, I heard this is the place to come. Smells like I'm right. Hi, my name's Ian. Mr. Ian Woon."

They shook hands through the bars of the gate, then Katie opened it and let him in.

"I'm Katie, Maths teacher by day, pork dealer by night. Did the Mahboula crowd send you here?"

"No, the Fintas Towers bunch. Funny, I would normally find the idea of pork pies baked by an Aussie a frightening one. But I've been in this place almost a month now, and at this point I'd take a bite out of a live pig if it ran past."

She smiled cheerfully. This guy was going to be a good customer, hopefully he was employed here on a good long contract. The problem was, the best customers were usually also the types who got out of town the quickest.

"Oh come on, try before you criticize. I promise there's no wallaby in it, just the finest Victorian Landrace"

She led Ian into the kitchen, which was still thick with the smells of cooking. Selecting one of the smaller, sample-sized pies off the hot tray, she broke it and offered the larger half to the Brit. She ate the rest in one bite and watched in mild amusement as her customer's eyes glazed over at the taste.

"How anyone could consider that unclean is beyond me," he spoke at last.

"Hey, people who can ban all alcohol are capable of anything."

"Ah, speaking of that...."

"Mahboula Beach Resort. It's close to Fintas. Mostly homebrew, almost tastes like beer or wine, but it gets the job done. If you're lucky someone might have got some gin or vodka through, but when they do they usually don't like to share."

"Thanks. Oh, I'll take a dozen pies for now. I've already been informed as to the price."

He pulled a thin bundle of folded Kuwaiti dinars out of his shirt pocket and laid them on the kitchen table. Katie grabbed the spatula.

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It was all very exciting, this smuggling business, and it appealed to her inner subversive, but it was starting to get a bit old. The thrill of striding through Customs

with a load of suitcases packed full of pork, ham and bacon was still a rush, albeit one she only got to experience every few months; from that point on everything else was starting to feel a bit too much like work. Even her newest acquisition, a triumph of smuggling that would ensure her a spot in the history of expat Kuwait, was starting to seem like more trouble than it was worth. This was most definitely not what she had come to the Middle East for. The Maths teaching wasn't much fun either, not that she ever expected it to be. There was only one reason *anyone* came to this country to work, and it sure wasn't to have fun. She must be the only expat here who had other, deeper motivations. Maybe she should learn from the rest and stick to making heaps of money.

Sitting down on the corner of her bed and looking in the mirror, Katie reminded herself once again, as she did almost every night, that she *really was* in Arabia, land of her childhood dreams. She'd really left the boring town of Toowoomba behind and come, all on her own, to the mysterious deserts of the Middle East. It was sounding more and more silly all the time, but she still remembered the way it had felt the day she left her home country--it was only two-odd years ago, after all--and she wasn't letting go of her mission this easily. She was here to make meaningful contact with a foreign and ancient culture, God damn it, and she wasn't going to let anything stand in her way, not even the culture itself. She straightened her white silk *gatra*, stood and checked her *disbdasha*, and forced a smile. There, her new haircut was the best yet. The person in the mirror was unmistakably a young Western man, dressed in the traditional Kuwaiti style.

She hated having to resort to this, but she'd realized eventually that it was the only way. As a woman, she couldn't do anything in this society. Sitting around with the wives, veiled and house-bound,

talking endlessly about the most domestic and inane subjects--not her idea of cultural interaction. Real life here was lived by the men, in the nightly *Diwanīyas*, arenas of epic social and political confrontation. That was where she needed to be, and this costume was her ticket in. As ancient and clichéd as the trick may be, she had to disguise herself as a man to get what she wanted. It all sounded good enough, but in reality it wasn't working out quite as well as she had hoped--now four months into the experiment, she was still finding the society almost as closed as ever. It helped when Ramadan arrived though; now was the most sociable and garrulous time of the year. Now she'd set her sights on one of the most prestigious *Diwanīyas* in the city, one frequented by Assembly ministers and artists. She felt a surge of confidence that tonight was the night she'd really break through to the inside.

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Katie pulled into the front of the Al-Maysarah *Diwaniya* in her SUV and jumped down to the enormous driveway, scaring a stray cat away in the process. She hoped that wasn't some sort of omen. No matter, time to do this thing, and a big entrance was the most important part. She strode in, trying to exude confidence and friendliness at the same time, through the impressively-modelled entrance arch and into the bright *Diwaniya* hall. As usual, the decor tried for elegant and overshot the mark, losing its way amongst the thousand-dinar curtains and Italian chandelier. As usual, the long sofas lining the room were draped with about twenty Kuwaiti men in spotless white *dishdashas*, lounging and talking to one another with dignified casualness. As usual, everyone turned their heads and stared for a brief second when Katie entered. They nodded a *salaam*, and she answered. One aspect of the culture she would never quite understand was why they always looked so

uncomfortable when they did that. It was well known that *Diwanīyas* were open to all men, regardless of nationality, social standing, or even familiarity. She wasn't crossing any boundaries here.

"What's wrong, don't see many foreign men wearing your traditional clothing?" she asked in her best Arabic to the old man sitting closest to the door. His eyes narrowed perceptibly, but he shook the hand she offered. "You must admit, it really is the best suited to this climate. I do not understand why anyone wears Western dress in Kuwait."

"Welcome, I am Omar Al-Maysarah," the man replied, glancing around the room nervously.

"My name is Ken, I am from Australia, but I've made Kuwait my new home. I'm teaching at the Al-Dasman school, but I'm really just here to learn about the culture." That was her usual introduction; she thought it covered all the basics. "And what do you do?"

"Businessman."

The visit didn't turn out any different in the end, in fact it was possibly even more of a disaster than usual. At least the food was good. After her eighth cup of tea, Katie decided to cut her losses. Even though most of the discussion tonight centered on the situation in Iraq, nobody showed much interest in talking to 'Ken'. She tried every trick she could come up with to break the ice and start a dialogue, any dialogue, but the men just didn't respond. She wanted to stand up and shout, "Hey! don't you care about the outside world?! Is your culture so great that you can't be bothered at all to share it with others, or learn about their ways?!" Instead, she stored the comments for future use, gave her (mostly ignored) goodbyes, and shuffled out the gateway. With a shout of frustration, she lunged at the stray cat which was now sleeping on the hood of her SUV, scaring it away yet again.

She jumped up behind the wheel and roared off into the busy night time traffic of the fourth ring road. For some reason she felt like going for a walk along the sea-front, something she hadn't done since her first week in Kuwait. She needed to think hard about what she was doing here. She'd promised herself from the beginning that she would be understanding and never critical of this culture that was not her own, but they sure were stretching their luck, the bastards. She reached up to snatch the white cloth off her head, then thought better of it and put her hand back on the wheel. Wearing a *dishdash* without a *gatra* would just look ridiculous.

Chapter Three The Captain's Tale

The Captain reclined on his bench at the ship's wheel, the brat standing on the middle rung of the railing to the port side. Stupid kid, God willing he'd fall and be done with it. The big passenger yacht cut a path through the dark and deserted waters of the Gulf, still warm from the long-since-set sun. "Warm and filthy," the Captain thought out loud. The brat turned his head, coming even closer to falling overboard with the action. "Warm and filthy," he repeated by way of explanation. "E'en as far out as Failaka Island, you can see the garbage they dump in here. No respect for th' sea, I tell you. It's a wonder their destal... desalination plants don't clog up with all of it. If it gets much worse, they will, and then the city won't have a single drop o' water to live on. Let's pray for an oil spill, kid."

The Captain reached beneath the ship's wheel into his rucksack and rummaged around for a few seconds, pulling out a bottle of cola which he opened on the metal corner of the bench. He took a quick swig, then added a bit of his special

ingredient from the smaller square bottle he kept at his side. Jackson's perfume was best added to something that didn't taste like, well, Jackson's perfume. No matter how much you watered it down, though, you could never quite get rid of that smell. He had come to loathe that smell like nothing else during his years in Kuwait; if it wasn't the only cheap source of alcohol around--or if there was any way to survive in this country without that alcohol--he'd never sail within a mile of the crap. There were much, much nicer perfumes around... like *her* perfume. Now that was a scent he could drink forever.

"You don't like our country very much, Captain." The brat had now climbed from the railing onto the fiberglass canopy over the deck.

"Smart thinking, kid. Maybe they're teaching you somethin' in school after all." "But why do you live here then?" the brat persisted.

He drained a third of the cola-perfume mixture, flinched, and pulled up his left sleeve. Holding his arm under the single light bolted to the canopy, he displayed a jagged row of gruesome scars.

"I was born in Hebron, in Palestine. You may have seen it on television. Enough said." That should shut the kid up for a while.

"Did you fight in a war against the Zionist Entity?"

"I fought in a war against a bulldozer, and th' bulldozer won. Now go below deck and get us a couple more colas."

Baby-sitting wasn't part of his job; if he'd been thinking straight at all, he would have charged extra for it. This trip had started out well before *Iftar* as an ordinary Failaka Island run, carrying a bunch of rich Kuwaitis out for their Ramadan camping parties. Normally he would have spent the night on the island and brought a new load back in the morning, but a certain young widow among the passengers had a son

who just wouldn't stop complaining. She must really have wanted some peace and quiet if she was willing to hire the entire boat just to carry the brat back to his grandparents. He'd undercharged her by half anyway. Ah, those eyes.

"I think I have a big problem, kid. I think I'm in love."

The brat was climbing the stairs from below deck, orange soda firmly attached to lips. He hadn't brought back any other drinks. Ah well, the Captain thought, screw it. He took a long swig straight from the perfume bottle, soon after which everything became infinitely more clear.

"Love, 'tain't even th' word for it. It's something far greater than that. We're meant t' be together for the rest of time. 'Tis the will of God, I can feel it. I've never felt this way 'bout anythin' at all." He felt around in his rucksack and reverentially lifted out a plastic bag. "See this? It's my gift t' her. You know what this is?"

The brat mumbled something into his soda and climbed back up to his perch on the railing.

"It's a *cunifarm tablet*, straight from Iraq. I gave a ride to some guys comin' down from there a few months ago, an' this's all they gave me. They said 'is from the museum, 'is thousands of years old. And I want to give it t' *her*, as a gift. That's how strong my love is. I'll bet you 'is as ancient love poem." He gingerly returned the treasure to his bag and took a few more drinks of the Jackson's perfume while he reflected on the majestic depth of his feelings.

"I'm dead serious, I don't know what'll become of me if we can't be together. Society is trying to keep us apart, but it can't, our love's too pure an' strong. Oh how terrible 'tis, two lovers kept apart by the walls of Society. Better that Society be destroyed than it stand in our way."

The brat was retreating back down the

stairs now, so the Captain was forced to raise his voice to be heard. Someone had to hear him.

"I'm in LOVE, ya hear me? LOVE!!" He gestured widely at the skyline of Kuwait, now drawing very close up ahead. "Tear this city down t' make room for our weddin' bed!!" He thought that sounded nice, whatever it might mean, so he shouted the command even louder. "TEAR THIS CITY DOWN TO MAKE ROOM FOR OUR WEDDING BED!" That last part didn't really make much sense, actually. "TEAR THIS CITY DOWN! TEAR IT DOWN!" He imagined a great armored bulldozer--a gargantuan version of the one that tore down his house years ago--driving right through the middle of the skyline, knocking towers into the sea. He'd like to see that. "SEND IN THE BULLDOZER!" It was no use, the city couldn't hear him. The whole world smelled of that damned perfume, and they couldn't hear him. There was nothing for it, he would have to crash his boat. He hoped the brat would understand.

The trick was in finding the perfect spot. As long as he was going to crash, he might as well make the most of it. No sense in plowing a couple of feet up the beach, scaring a seagull or two, when you could be causing some real destruction. He shifted the ship's wheel to set them on a course further north, towards the center of town. There was one place in particular where he'd always dreamed of crashing--Sharq Market. The massive waterfront shopping mall was only a few years old, the most modern and expensive complex in the city. Swarming with rich bastards, buying European sunglasses, eating fast food, picking up women. The Captain pushed the throttle up as high as it would go. The yacht roared, rocking and bouncing over the water's surface. There was the mall straight ahead, all lit up for the Holy Month. And in front, next to the

attached marina packed with luxury powerboats, a boat ramp leading up to the side of the mall. It wasn't quite perfect; he'd wanted to crash through the full-length sea front windows, but those were too high above the shore. The ramp would land him somewhere in the parking lot. Oh well, this time of night there should be more than enough very expensive cars parked there. He could make out the shoppers on the second floor now, oblivious to his imminent arrival. One last swig of Jackson's and he tossed the empty bottle over the rail into the boat's foaming wake. The brat had better be holding on tight, here's the ramp. Crap, he should have thought of a good shout for the occasion, too late now. "YEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRG H!" For the split second of weightlessness after leaving the ramp, everything seemed a whole lot better.

The parking lot was indeed packed wall to wall. The finest works of automotive engineering money could buy rested resplendent in long straight rows, chrome and other more exotic alloys reflecting the soft light of the Ramadan moon. Masterpieces of design, each more sleek and perfect of form than the last. One particularly striking and expensive row of almost three dozen of these sports cars became the unwitting landing pad for the Captain's vessel, their well-waxed bodies offering little friction to meet the yacht's forward momentum. It crossed the entire length of the Sharq Market parking lot in a matter of seconds, crushing millions of dinars of Kuwaiti oil wealth before plowing into the center of the Gulf Road. Here the vessel ended its destructive run; anyone driving on the Gulf Road in the predawn hours of Ramadan already had the reflexes of a cat, and a large boat entering the lanes of traffic at a right angle through the hedge presented no real danger and little surprise to a Kuwaiti driver. It did, however, have the makings

of one hell of a traffic jam.

The Captain's expectations were far exceeded by the trip, in fact he felt quite pleased with the outcome. He would never have bet on making it as far as the Gulf Road. He grabbed his rucksack--didn't look like anything was broken--and slid down the listing deck, jumping over the railing to the road a meter below with a flourish. He dashed quickly to the sidewalk, turned and stared grimly at the beached vessel as he imagined an uninvolved passer-by might, shook his head in feigned amazement, and walked away. He walked east, cuneiform tablet and three bottles of perfume clinking together over his shoulder. Funny, he couldn't quite remember what all that had been about now. Love, or something.

Chapter Four

The Cat-Watcher's Tale

Ramadan was very different in Kuwait early in the 20th century, especially in the summer of 1920. That was the year Abd Al-Aziz Bin Abd Al-Rahman, the Saudi conqueror of Najd, turned his sights on the defenceless city-state. His feared Ikhwan army, desert warriors of the Muslim Brotherhood, looked to make short work of the peaceful harbor town. Without even a wall for protection, it was surely doomed. Thus the entire populace turned out to help build just such a wall as quickly as possible. Men, women and children of all ages hauled sand and mud into the wooden moulds, packing it hard with their feet. The Holy Month arrived when the construction work had only just begun, but the people worked on through the fifty-five-degree days regardless of the added burden of fasting. By the time Ramadan finished and the Eid celebrations came, the city stood safe behind enormous ramparts with eight towering gates. The

Ikhwan were surprised by the miraculous appearance of the defences when they finally launched their attack soon after, and were driven away after a short siege at the Red Fort of Jahra a short distance from the city.

Kuwait had grown far out into the desert since those wild days, and all that now remained of the great Ramadan wall were four of the gates. Largest of these was Jahra Gate, which once opened to the Red Fort and the great Western caravan path. It now sat alone and with its mighty wooden doors permanently closed, shaded from the moonlight by trees and office towers, in the center of a busy roundabout at the end of the First Ring Road. A plaintive *meow* echoed from somewhere within the structure.

"I know, I know, I hear you. Don't expect the world to come to a stop just because you're hungry." Yasser watched closely for a break in the traffic circling the roundabout, trying to gauge how long a dash across the wide road would take. He turned briefly to give orders to the two other cats that were sitting upright on the wall behind him with curious eyes. "Don't try to follow me across. Those drivers out there wouldn't even notice running over someone of your size. Just wait." The white cat began washing its paws while the spotted one just rolled over on its side. They had obviously never intended to cross anyway; they were content to sit here and watch him get himself killed. He pulled his notebook out of a back pocket to write that thought down. These two were such spectators, Mighty Paw and Flycatcher. The note-taking almost caused him to miss a perfect gap in the stream of cars; he ran to the bushes on the far side with half a second to spare before the next speeding pack of SUVs closed in.

It really was dark here behind the screen of trees. Jahra Gate was a hulking black

mass in the middle of the clearing, *meowing* sadly. The cry sounded like it was coming from high up, possibly even the roof. Yasser located the even blacker entrance to the gatehouse and felt his way in, wondering whether he really ought to break down and start carrying a flashlight for jobs like this. Cultivating cat-like night vision sounded nice in theory, but he doubted whether even a cat would be able to see anything in here. The sound of another *meow* helped him find the stairs. They were littered with plaster rubble and something that crunched like either leaves or paper, all of which he tried his best to avoid stepping on. This wasn't an operation that required any degree of stealth, of course--he just liked to stay in practice. By the time he emerged onto the observation post on the roof of the gate, his pupils had dilated to the point where he could see almost perfectly in the shadowy clearing. There, he knew he was better off without a flashlight. *MEOW!!* The cry right next to his ear made him duck with surprise. Ah, so here she was, a skinny black kitten with comically large white ears. She looked completely miserable crouched between the pointed battlements. "Hello, young one. What an old dusty place you've found to stay in. I'm guessing either you're a big history lover or you're afraid to cross that road again."

mrreeow.

"Alright, I'll give you a lift if you're going my way." He picked up the kitten by the skin of her neck and placed her on his head.

After retracing his steps through the inner rooms of the gatehouse, trying to navigate solely by memory without touching the walls, Yasser returned to the curb with his new passenger. The other side looked twice as far away from here. Mighty Paw and Flycatcher were still over there watching and waiting. They may have to wait a while longer - the traffic was only

getting worse, and from the inside of the circle it was impossible to see more than a few meters up the road. Cars seemed to appear without warning from beyond the curve of the bushes, not following any sort of predictable pattern. He started to think that he may have gotten himself into a bit of a bind. The kitten's *meow* left no doubt that she considered this the last straw.

He crouched on the curb, waiting for a lull in traffic that he could never quite be sure of. Once more he thought he saw it, but before he could even stand up another three cars roared past, apparently drag racing. He'd already circled the bounds of his trap and the bushes were just as high and obstructive at every point. This might as well be an island in the middle of a rushing river. He took the kitten off his head and held her up in the minimal light. "So I guess if we're both living on this island now I might as well introduce myself. Name's Yasser, I'm a reporter. And you..." He looked the scraggly little animal over for distinguishing characteristics. Something special was in order for this one. "What do you think of the name "Ears Of Destiny?" The kitten simply stared at him, enormous ears sticking out at two different angles. "No objections then? Fine."

Yasser reached for his notebook to record the name, but was interrupted by an SUV that--wonder of wonders!--screeched to a halt in front of him. He opened the backseat door and jumped in, and the driver pulled off again immediately; idling for long in the middle of a roundabout was best avoided. It was a formidable woman, probably in her forties, hair covered with a light blue scarf. She had huge hooped earrings that lent her a comical appearance not entirely unlike Ears Of Destiny's.

"Well? What were you up to in there?"

He climbed into the front seat with Ears Of Destiny; the lady glanced

disapprovingly at the kitten as she left the circle for the First Ring Road.

"Hi, I'm Yasser, I'm a... reporter."

"For what, *Al-Seyaasa*?" she shot back. Was she suspicious or just in a hurry?

"Nothing like that, just--you know--a website. I write about events among the, er, cat community here in Kuwait, and post it all on the internet." He added: "I like to say that it's their city, we just feed them."

"And just who reads that?"

"Anyone in the world can, that's the wonder of the internet..."

"But who *actually* reads it?" she rejoined triumphantly as if finishing off a political debate.

"Ah. Headed into town, are you? I live over near Kuwait Towers if you're going that far."

"Only if you tell me exactly what you're planning to do with that kitten."

It took only a few minutes after he returned to his flat to give Ears Of Destiny some food and photograph her for the Chronicle website. Now the big question was where she should go from here. Easily solved--he'd drop her over at the Towers, where Sparrow and The Abbess would look after her. They were good, understanding cats who wouldn't mind showing a young kitten the ropes. Not nearly as territorial as some of the others, plus there was plenty of food to go around over there. Ears Of Destiny looked like she'd need it judging by the way she was attacking that plate of chicken. While she scarfed the rest of it down, Yasser made notes on the Jahra Gate incident to write up later on as a full-length article. He'd focus on the inherent pathos and mystery of a young feline living alone in an ancient citadel, cut off from the rest of the world. The "rescue" was not so important; he didn't like to write about anything *he* himself did. He was supposed to be the invisible observer, the chronicler, not some kind of hero. Not even the most

committed observer, however, could resist the cries of a frightened and trapped kitten.

That's why he had always thought Schrodinger was full of it.

Chapter Five The Wastamancer's Tale

Rashid Bin Hamed Al-Sabah the Wastamancer helped himself to a few more stuffed vine leaves and a can of cola off the holiday buffet table and returned to the sombre atmosphere of the Diwaniya hall. The topic had turned, as it always did at some point in the night, to the debacle in Iraq.

"Can't you see that it's a no-win situation for Kuwait? Of course I trust the Amir and the Al-Sabah family to steer us through it, but they really have their work cut out for them."

"Nonsense! Have you even been reading the papers today? The Arab World is almost one hundred percent behind the United States now, after all these months of terrorist attacks in Iraq. How can anyone still support the Iraqis?"

"That's putting it a bit strongly, my good friend. One is inclined to wonder just what sort of papers you read."

"I prefer to take a more philosophical view of the issue..."

That's it, thought Rashid, here comes the philosophy. His father ought to set a precedent and ban poets from his Diwaniya outright; they were attracted to these things like flies. He took another drink from the cola can and left the rest sitting on the windowsill along with his paper plate. No matter, he was wasting his time here anyway. He wasn't in any mood to listen to these old fools' opinions on the Imperialist follies across the border, and it wasn't helping his wasta one bit. He silently walked across to his father to talk

his way out.

"Ah, Rashid, there you are," his father Hamed bin Aziz said around the mouthpiece of his smouldering *sheesha*.

"We've got a big group tonight. How's the *halwa* holding out?"

"I don't know, I didn't notice it."

"Would you mind checking? You know what I always say, *halwa* is the most important part of Ramadan."

"Yeah, I'm sure the servants will take care of it. You tell them that every night. Listen dad, I'm thinking about heading over to the Al-Maysarah Diwaniya, I think some of my friends might be there."

"Sure, sure." He waved his hand dismissively. "Tell Omar I said hello, and thanks for that tip on the Slovenian lumber stock."

Rashid left the building as fast as he could--it sounded like the conversation was turning to women's voting rights, and he just couldn't stomach *that* discussion one more time.

He slid into his shining black car in the side driveway, taking off his *gatra* and dropping it on the other seat. Then he pulled his *dishdashba* over his head and set it aside as well. He couldn't drive properly in the stupid dress; he'd never wear it at all if it was up to him. Underneath he was wearing a designer British t-shirt and jeans, his preferred outfit. He tore out of the driveway with as much tire noise as he could muster and accelerated down the lane towards the Gulf Road. At the same time he flipped on the sound system and some heavy duty hip-hop started blasting out, courtesy of the Superstation. The Al-Maysarah Diwaniya, he thought, haven't been there since--what--July? None of his 'friends' would be there, that was just an excuse for his father. His 'friends'--if by that word he meant guys he knew who were his own age--would all be down in Salmiya now, wasting their time. He'd have half a mind to join them if it wasn't for the Revolution.

One of the first things he had learned about life was the importance of *wasta*. *Wasta* was the very fabric of Kuwaiti reality; what it boiled down to, basically, was knowing the right people. More importantly than that, though, was putting those connections to work. If you had lunch with the Treasury Minister's secretary, that was *wasta*; if you used that connection six months later to get yourself a driver's license at the age of fifteen without a driving test, that was *wastamancy*. That had been two years ago however, he had learned a lot since then. There were so many tricks to it--knowing exactly which name to drop on whoever you were trying to influence was most important, but there was also the tone of voice, the confidence you conveyed. You had to make them think you knew exactly what you were doing; that you and your contacts and the whole *status quo* knew the outcome; that this was business as usual, and it would happen whether they chose to make their own life difficult by standing in your way or not. Rashid was a born *wastamancer*. He sometimes thought he could see the threads running through this society from one person to another as shining strands of a spider's web, which he could pull and tie at his leisure. Of course, it didn't hurt that he was an Al-Sabah, born into a branch (if a rather weak branch) of the great family that had ruled Kuwait for as long as there had been a Kuwait. No, that didn't hurt at all.

He turned onto the Gulf Road at last, coming within inches of another car traveling 120 Kph. He sped up for this stretch. While dodging between other, slower vehicles at an extraordinary velocity, he turned down the volume on the hip-hop and pulled his mobile out of the pocket of the discarded *dishdashba*. Better get some intel from his mentor. "Hey, Mohammed, how's it going?" "Rashid! Peace be upon you. Not going so

well, I must admit, this court case is really a pain. And just what are you up to tonight?"

"Sorry to hear that. Don't let those dirty dogs get you down, I'm looking into helping you out."

"I told you you don't want to get involved in this Rashid. They'll take you apart with me."

"Come on, you've taught me better than that. Anyway, I'm headed to the Al-Maysarah. Just checking whether you know what's going on down there tonight."

"Sorry, I've been out of the loop lately. Say hello to Omar for me, he's making me a rich man with that Slovenian thing. Not so sure that it'll help me much now."

"Good luck, talk to you later."

Mohammed had been playing the *wasta* game for a long time, and had taught Rashid everything he knew. He was an Al-Ghanim, and his merchant blood made him only play for money. But he was getting old, he'd slipped up and made some enemies, and now they were closing in. Rashid hadn't actually decided yet whether to come to his aid--he had much bigger plans, and he didn't want to destroy them over something so trivial. He was an Al-Sabah, and they never just played for money.

All at once, he was forced to hit the brakes for the first time since leaving his father's Diwaniya. It wasn't just a red light--he never stopped for those of course--in fact, this looked like a serious traffic jam. It stretched as far as he could see up ahead towards Sharq; there must have been a serious accident up there. Should've taken the First Ring Road, now he was screwed. Too late to turn onto a side street, boxed in on three sides. He rolled up the curb onto the wide median between two of the trees planted along it and turned off the engine. Might as well walk for as long as this mess was going to take to clear up. He may not make it to the Diwanya tonight,

but he wasn't so sure he really wanted to go there anymore. His flow of enthusiasm seemed to have stopped along with the flow of traffic.

After about a minute of walking, he was surprised to see a dark rounded shape blocking all lanes of the road in front of Sharq Market, flashlight beams playing over its surface. No wonder there's a jam, he thought; what kind of accident was *that* thing? It could almost be taken for some sort of alien spacecraft, landed in the middle of Kuwait. There was a flash of blue and red from behind him--police car. It pulled up at his side.

"Is that your vehicle on the median back there?"

The force of his wasta lashed out compulsively.

"Sorry if it's any trouble, I'm going to a party at Commissioner _____'s house, it's nearby. I'll send someone over to fetch the car when I get there." The name he spoke didn't even register in his own mind; it was simply pulled automatically from the appropriate mental file for this situation. The effect on the two policemen, on the other hand, was like an electric shock.

"No trouble, sir. We'll post an officer to guard it until then. Good evening." The car did a U-turn in the empty lanes and sped away.

Hah, too easy. But that was just party tricks. He continued on down the median.

His mood was taking a turn for the worse the further from his car he walked. 'Party trick' it may have been, but it was about as useful as any he could hope to perform, and you couldn't run a revolution like that. The problem was, anyone on whom wasta could be used was by definition already invested in the *status quo*; there was no way on Earth to con such a person into willfully destroying their whole comfortable world. Wasta represented the problem, the weakness and corruption of the government Sheikhs and the Al-Sabah

family behind them all, so how did he really expect it to be the solution as well? Help would have to come from outside the system altogether--from regions where his powers were useless.

Chapter Six The Slave's Tale

"Happy Birthday", Mr. Vijay from the Agency said without a hint of malice as he took Laxman's passport from him. "Come see the house now?"

The house looked like the usual sort, meaning it was a near-palace of outlandish proportions, boxy and pure white. The pointed mock battlements around the top were just a bit too much, even by Kuwaiti standards. The strings of lights outlining its square angles for Ramadan didn't make it look any friendlier. The Agency man led Laxman past the ornate and oversized wooden doors to the discrete servants' entrance behind a date palm around the side. He paused to find the right key on an overloaded Statue of Liberty key ring.

"I know what you're thinking," Mr. Vijay continued indulgently, "you're thinking you've hit the big time. Let me tell you about these houses. Big house means lots of meters of floor to clean, that's all, you can be sure they don't pay any better than anyone else."

"And my passport?" Laxman already knew the answer to this question.

"Thinking about leaving already, huh," the agent laughed and waved his clipboard at Laxman. "You Sri Lankans are always in a hurry to go home, it must be a beautiful island. No, you signed up for six years and that's what you'll get. If you've saved enough KD for a ticket home after six years you can go to China for all I care, but if you've sent all your salary back to your family like the rest then you'll probably find yourself with another six-year contract. That's just the way things

work here in Paradise.”

You’d think the Agency would have found someone not quite so thoroughly unpleasant to show the new employees around. Having to give up his passport and freedom to *this* repulsive scoundrel was just adding insult to injury. He followed the man through the servant’s entrance into the kitchen.

“Are the Kuwaitis who live here...”

“Stay away from the owners if you know what’s good for you,” Mr. Vijay interrupted, “and they will ignore you right back. They talk about us as parasites.” He opened one of the doors a fraction to give Laxman a view of a brightly-lit sitting room, sparkling beneath crystal chandeliers and wall-sized landscape paintings. “I prefer the term ‘zookeeper’ myself.” He chuckled at his joke and pulled the door shut. They continued up a narrow flight of stairs to an equally narrow hallway, Mr. Vijay pointing to one of the four doors that lined it as though loath to touch the thing himself. “This is you, the others belong to the cook, gardener, and another cleaner like yourself. Lazy Filipino, he’s likely to make you do all the work anyway.”

Laxman let himself into the unlocked room and surveyed grimly the single bed, shelf and window. Thank the gods he wasn’t planning to stay, this was downright depressing. His father had always assured him constantly that working in Kuwait, no matter at how lowly a job, was far better than living with the war and suspicion back home; right now, however, Laxman would rather go to Sri Lanka and join the Tigers than stay one night or day in this place. He wondered how much time he should give Mr. Vijay to leave the neighborhood before making his getaway. “Okay, is that everything? I’d really like to get some sleep... Sir?”

He turned and saw that the door was closed behind him. Mr. Vijay hadn’t followed him in. He dropped his modest

duffle bag and grabbed the doorknob; it wouldn’t open. The *asuras* had locked him in! He kicked the bottom of the locked door four times, then walked to the bed and sat down. It collapsed to one side, two legs falling off with a clatter. He could imagine Mr. Vijay justifying the action in the morning: we do it with all the new employees for the first few nights, just until they get settled in. Why did you need to leave the room anyway if you didn’t want to run away or steal something?

Ah well, Indra curse them all. This didn’t change his plans one bit, it only made things a bit more complicated. He rose from the broken pile of bedding and checked the window. Sealed tight, and he didn’t fancy breaking anything if it could be avoided. There was another small door that turned out to open into a tiny and foul-smelling toilet which this room shared with the one next door, but if there was anyone over there they had locked their entrance from the outside. Knocking provoked no response. He was starting to think that, in the long run, a broken window wasn’t *that* big of a deal, when he noticed a trap door in the corner of the bathroom’s ceiling above the shower. Perfect, he had to remember to give many prayers of thanks to the Remover of Obstacles if he made it out of here tonight. Lifting a thin piece of plywood, he nimbly climbed up into the pitch black room above. It struck him then that he had left his duffle bag behind in the room; he didn’t feel at all like going back down for it, even though it would only take a moment. Better to start out fresh with only the three dinar in his pocket—if he didn’t have a passport, he didn’t really have anything anyway. A few seconds later and his eyes had adjusted enough to find the door of the empty store room.

The roof of the house with its ocean breezes felt cool and refreshing after the airless interior. It wasn’t much less of a

prison though. Laxman tried the two other doors leading downstairs and both were bolted tight--only the empty storeroom was open. He stood behind the pointed decorative cranellations along the front of the roof and looked down. He guessed he'd have to make creative use of the strings of lights the owners had put up for Ramadan. Easy enough, they were the type made of clear plastic hoses with the lights on the inside, just strong enough to hold his weight. He hoped so anyway. Still he was hesitant, if only because he hadn't the slightest idea where he would go from here. If only his dad had given him more than five days' warning about all this he could have planned everything out properly; that was probably the exact reason his father had kept it a secret. Laxman had always known that his eighteenth birthday would be a big deal for him, in fact he had looked forward to the occasion for years. But this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind all that time. As soon as he reached eighteen, he was no longer covered under his father's work visa, a fact he'd always mistakenly seen as his chance to 'return' to Sri Lanka. Whether his father truly believed he was better off staying and working for one of these crooked servants' agencies, or whether he simply didn't have the money on hand to buy his son a ticket to Colombo, Laxman couldn't be sure. It would only have been a return home in the most technical sense anyway, and in the eyes of the officials who would have checked his Sri Lankan passport; in reality he'd been born in Dubai and moved to Kuwait with his father when he was six, immediately after the country opened up to South Asian workers following the Gulf War. His dad had only been allowed to bring one family member into Kuwait with him, and he chose Laxman instead of his mother (she was back in the village now, bless her) because there were so many 'opportunities' here. Hah.

Where he would go next could work itself out when he was on solid ground. He peeled a lighted cable off the corner of the house like a climbing vine and tied the top end around a water pipe. He knew clearly enough where he was ultimately headed, of course. Sri Lanka, India, even Pakistan would do--they were all the same to a Gulf kid. He still spoke perfect Tamil, Sinhala and Hindi, and he could easily disappear into the crowds of the Subcontinent. That was the real world, not these soulless oil cities turned upside-down by wealth. Laxman had grown up reading the great myths in the books of his school library, of the battles of the Pandavas and the exile of Rama and all the rest. That was the world he belonged to by right, and it was only an ocean away. He'd make it there if he had to swim.

Climbing over the fake battlements, he descended from the roof on a thread of light. Getting to India would be anything but easy for an eighteen-year-old with no passport; Rama never had to deal with Kuwaiti prisons or unpayable fines, or with his father for that matter. The only real option open to Laxman was to lay low for a while, avoid running into anyone who might recognize him, and keep his eyes open to possibilities. That, and pray every minute of the night to the Remover of Obstacles.

Chapter Seven

The Towers

His briefcase really did seem to be getting heavier the longer Ali walked. He fished the last date out of the crumpled bag in the pocket of his *thob shillabat* and popped it in his mouth, not savoring the taste quite so much as he had the first dozen or so. Half a kilogram of dates was an awful lot to eat no matter how long of a journey one was engaged in. He pulled the last stone of

the last date out from between his teeth and tossed it into the undiminished and never-slowng stream of traffic. For the last time there was no effect; the *jinnis* really were slacking off these days. Exactly where was he now? Everything looked so different from down here on the side of the road. There was a sign, suspended high above the traffic: Bnaid Al-Gar, straight ahead. So if he kept on his present course, following the tail end of the Abd Al-Aziz Bin Abd Al-Rahman Al-Saud Custodian Of The Two Holy Mosques Expressway (a.k.a. the 30), he would soon reach the sea right at the Kuwait Towers. Not much of a destination really, he would have liked some place more exciting. Set forth for Damascus... Set forth for the coast of India... Set forth for the biggest purpose-built tourist trap in Kuwait... Didn't quite have the same ring to it.

He did have to admit they looked the part--at least from a distance--when they finally came into view beyond the housing blocks. Three white spires tapering to needle-like metal points, one piercing two spheres encrusted with glittering geometric tiles and another a single sphere. The whole thing looked like a giant science fiction moon base from a very unimaginative and over-budgeted movie. It was really just a relic of the heady Space Age optimism of 1970's Kuwait, when the oil would last forever and carry mankind however far it wished to go, when oil meant a country was a part of the modern world and no longer a part of the "troubled" Middle East. It had been altogether one of the most intentionally and unabashedly modern monuments of its day; building something like that was just asking for trouble.

He considered these points as he approached the still distant spires along the last stretch of the First Ring Road, and came to the conclusion that he just didn't care. It was just one more stupid self-

glorifying monument (it wasn't even necessary to go into the obvious phallic significance.) The only difference between the Towers and, say, a giant statue of Saddam Hussein was... well... that the Towers were still standing, really. For now. Useless structures like these never lasted very long; great stories outlived such inane concrete follies by millennia. It was the stories that...

The light of the moon darkened for a full second. Ali glanced up too late to see what had cast the shadow. There were no clouds of course--this city hardly knew what a cloud looked like--and even over the traffic noise he should be able to hear a low-flying airplane. A secret military experiment, or a dragon, or something even stranger the name of which had never been spoken by a human tongue? He'd just assume it was a dragon until the shadow-caster chose to show his/her/itself and provide him with evidence to the contrary. A blue dragon, five meters in length, flying low in search of prey. Yep, that was a satisfactory enough explanation for him.

Dragon or not, he hoped it wasn't an omen. Nah, who was he kidding, he hoped it WAS an omen. An omen meant that something momentous was about to happen. Still watching the night sky above with its stars and planets (and dragons?) washed out by the light of the city, he almost stumbled right into the middle of the intersection with Sour Street. The best way to the Towers was to follow Sour to the Gulf Road, so he turned left and walked on, eyes straying upwards at intervals. From the Gulf Road--busy as ever in the westbound lanes but a bit less so eastbound--he could see the smooth silent ocean backing the palm trees, restaurants and littered beach. He couldn't walk much farther in this direction; the land would come to a point at the Towers, and after that he'd either have to stop,

head south-west towards Sharq and downtown, or swim. He pulled out his pocket watch again for the first time since leaving the Sultan Center in Salmiya. It was an old-looking hand wound Russian model that he'd found at the Friday Market almost a year ago. You could find anything at the Friday Market. Three o'clock! So he didn't have as much time left as he'd thought; the final call to prayer heralding the approach of *Imsak* would echo from the minarets before long, and that was the signal to eat up before dawn and the start of the day's fast. Come to think of it, why did they still play the 'call to prayer' when it was really a call to cram oneself full of last minute snacks? Never mind the modern decay of the Holy Month, the implication for him and his walk was that if anything was going to happen tonight, it had better appear soon. Maybe-dragons flitting across the moon didn't really count.

He covered the last stretch to the Kuwait Towers and strode through the open gate in the fence surrounding the open flagstoned area at their mighty feet. The observation deck in the highest sphere was closed, so nobody was around to make him buy a ticket for admission. The instant he passed the gateway he was struck by a sense of great importance that came out of nowhere and enveloped him. This was definitely where he'd been walking to through the early morning hours, and he was about to find out exactly why, he could feel it in the air. He realized that for the first time in a long while he felt like a character in a story, which was a feeling he liked. The excitement was building to such an intensity that Ali actually began to run, between the wide smooth trunks of the Towers, illuminating himself briefly in the spotlights shining on them, to the sea's edge beyond. He grabbed the railing to steady himself and looked around frantically, up at the huge globes suspended above him, down into the inky

water bobbing with plastic bags, left and right along the deserted pier. Nothing, nothing at all, just another corner of the same old Kuwait. What had he expected, that blue dragon? The feeling was still with him though, that was for sure. He turned around and saw other figures between the Towers.

There, in the exact midpoint of the triangle, was what looked like a young foreign woman wearing... a *dishdashba*? He took a cautious step forward; she just continued to stand still as if spellbound. This was a part of the puzzle, the feeling that was invading his mind told him that clearly enough. But she wasn't the only one, there were at least one other coming, not yet in the light of the Towers.

There was a small scraping sound to his left, from the side wall of the enclosure. A man about his age, in a dark green shirt and darker pants that made him difficult to see, climbed to the top of the high partition holding something small and furry. One cat, then another, leapt up beside him. The man's expression was that of one who had just seen a *jinni* disappearing down a dark alley.

Another furtively appeared into the spotlights, a young Indian looking deeply frightened. He stared at the woman in the *dishdashba*, she stared at him, and then they both stared at the person on the wall. That person leapt down, landing with hardly a sound, and paced towards them followed closely by the two cats. Ali realized that he himself was still in the shadows at the pier's edge and the three had not yet seen him. Without a second thought he took five more steps forward into the light. Another round of staring began.

Before that round had even run its course yet another figure emerged from the darkness in the direction of the gate. A teenager with an impressive haircut and

what Ali assumed to be very fashionable clothes, the look of cool-ness undermined by a profoundly confused expression. The five strangers stood in silence--or rather the ambient sounds of the Gulf Road--considering each other's significance. It was plain to see that they were all host to exactly the same unexplained feeling of... what? Purpose? Destiny? Whatever it was, they had now met, and something was to happen. It felt like *deja vu* in reverse; not that he'd seen these people before, but that he would be seeing a whole lot of them in the future. Most of all, it felt like a beginning. This thought reminded him of one of his favorite axioms: every beginning was also the end of something else. Fine by him.

He was starting to deliberate on whether to begin composing some words to possibly speak to the others when a large unshaven man with a backpack and a small glass bottle stumbled into the area of light. "Has anyone seen my boat?" he cried like an incantation, and the mysterious feeling fled into the slowly fading night.

Chapter Eight

The Coffee Bean Room

ON THE SECOND NIGHT

* * * * *

"Hallo there! cast off the cable and pull up the mooring-pole!" Quoth Nur al-Din, "Whither bound, O captain?" and quoth he, "To the House of Peace, Baghdad," --And Shahrazad perceived the dawn of day and ceased to say her permitted say.

--The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night; translation of Sir Richard F. Burton

* * * * *

Laxman sat on the edge of his thin mattress, trying to stack stray coffee beans more than eight high. Eight seemed to be the upper threshold; a ninth would cause the stack to collapse every time, no matter how careful he was. He tried once more, watching the precarious tower fall before the ninth bean he was holding between his fingers had even touched it. The sound of falling coffee beans, though no less miniscule than one would imagine, somehow woke up his room mate.

"Was that the *Iftar* call to prayer? Can we eat now?" the Captain mumbled, rolling over into a sitting position on his own squeaking mattress. It emitted a loud *pop* in protest. He hadn't been too happy with the comfort level of the bedding when they had arrived in the early morning, so he'd improvised with a roll of old bubble wrap he had scavenged from the corner of the room.

"No, it was the sound of seven coffee beans falling," said Laxman incredulously, "how could you even hear it over there?"

"Everything sounds loud in this tiny room, I'm used to the wide open sea with the wind in my ears." His mattress produced another sharp report, making him wince. "Hell of a place to have a headache."

"No offence, but you probably wouldn't have that problem if you hadn't drunk so much perfume last night. Drink some black coffee or something, they say that helps."

The Captain surveyed the cardboard boxes of coffee beans, stacked right to the ceiling.

"Real funny, kid. Even if we had any hot water, it isn't *Iftar* yet. We're not all infidels here."

"How do you know it's not *Iftar*? Can you see the sun or hear the mosques from our little room? I sure can't."

"But... but surely the others wouldn't leave us here past sunset? That's inhuman! I'll

starve if I can't break my fast!"

Laxman doubted the large, muscular man would starve after a month adrift at sea. He may not be the smartest Arab he'd met, but he sure looked like a tough one.

"Never mind that, they shall come for us when they shall come for us. At least we're in a safe place right now."

"So you're hiding out too, kid? I think I crashed my boat last night."

"That's what we gathered, although you weren't too coherent. I didn't crash anything, but I am hiding out--I'm trying to return to my own land against the wishes of my employers, and they definitely have the upper hand. I don't know where I would have gone if... all of you hadn't shown up."

"Who are... we? All I remember is being brought here by some people, and a young kid telling me I could sleep here for a while."

"I don't think any of us know who 'we' are, we all just sort of ran into each other, and now we're stuck. Do you remember what it felt like there at the Towers? Indra's Heaven, it was amazing."

The man scratched his tangled mass of hair, willing his brain to recall more details from the recent perfume-hazed past.

"No, I don't remember anything about any towers. But if we're hanging out together now, that's fine by me. I'm a Captain without a boat now, what else would I do?"

"And I'm a traveller without a passport. We should get on just fine." He tried a nervous little laugh. "I'm Laxman from... Sri Lanka. And you..."

"Just call me Captain, that's good enough."

Laxman waited a few moments, but it sounded like that was all the response he was going to get.

"The others, are they on the run," the Captain restarted the conversation at last, "is this some sort of escape ring? I know about operations like this up in Iraq. If you're not careful you end up chopped

apart for organs, or so I heard."

"Oh no, of course not. They were three Kuwaitis and a Westerner, I think, and none of them seemed to know each other either. I didn't get to learn much about them because *Imsak* was called before we'd been properly introduced and everyone was in a hurry to eat as usual. The one in the t-shirt brought us here--he seemed to be someone of great influence. I feel we will be safe under the watch of such a Kuwaiti."

The Captain actually laughed out loud. "Hahhaar, you trust a Kuwaiti? So young and innocent."

He punctuated his comment by collecting a handful of loose beans off the floor with a single sweep of his hand, stacking ten of them in a single column with deft ease.

"This isn't the first back room of a coffee shop I've been shut up in, if you know what I mean."

They kept talking for what must have been at least an hour, Laxman relating his whole life story and the Captain only dropping the occasional cryptic hint of information. There was no sign that the other four strangers would appear anytime soon. He wondered how long they should wait before giving up and venturing beyond the bounds of the cramped store room and the toilet next door--he was hungry, going on very hungry, and his companion must be five times as hungry judging by the frequency with which he mentioned the fact. But the Kuwaiti kid--Rashomon, was it? No, probably not--the Kuwaiti kid had given him dire warnings about that sort of thing. The front part of this establishment didn't look like the kind of place people like him and the Captain could hope to blend in. They would just have to keep waiting. This running-away business entailed much more waiting around than Laxman had expected; much more and he'd start to consider it downright boring

All pressing and not-quite-so-pressing

topics of conversation now having been exhausted, the Captain was keeping himself busy opening each identical cardboard box in the room, unstacking them and restacking them following a much less organized system in order to check the contents. It was all plastic bags of coffee beans so far, as the labels on the outside made perfectly clear (COFFEE BEANS, they said), but he wasn't buying it. This was the perfect place to smuggle something--like black-market whiskey for instance. Now that would be a find worth the effort, five or six free bottles of something the Kuwaitis with their huge wallets and expensive tastes regularly paid sixty-five dinar a bottle for. Plus, the Jackson's perfume taste had never quite left his poor hungry mouth.

"You know what coffee shop this is, don't you?" the Indian kid said. "I really doubt the largest coffee shop chain in the world is going to be involved in liquor smuggling."

The kid was good enough company, but he kept on showing his ignorance of how Kuwait really worked. Had he really been living here since he was six years old? That had been one sheltered childhood. He continued his search. "Aha!" This one didn't feel quite the same. But it was lighter than the others, not heavier as liquor should be; that must mean... Dammit. He folded back the flaps and dumped the pile of compact discs in flimsy home labelled sleeves on the bean-strewn concrete floor. "Dammit." He'd hit a pornography load, and not even the printed kind. He picked a VCD up from the top of the pile. The Indian stared as if he'd watched him dump severed human body parts out of the box. "Let's see, 'Shades and the...' Ohhh, that's just wrong." He gathered up the heap of discs and stuffed them back in the box hurriedly. "Best not to get involved with that stuff. Regular old pornography is fine by me, but that's just taking it a bit too far. Wow, I sure am hungry."

"I can't believe you just... " the Indian stammered, "who would have guessed that Star..."

"I keep telling you there's much more to Kuwait than you've seen from your school playground. Anyway, I've heard rumors about this company. Do you really think there's one on every street corner in every city in the West just because they brew a good cup of coffee?" He was having fun blowing this kid's mind, but he sure could use something to eat right about now.

"That's absurd."

"Listen, you ever been to Friday Market?"

"Yeah yeah, I know, you can buy anything at Friday market. That's what everyone always says."

He chuckled. "They do, do they? Well it's not true. Ever been to Friday Market when it's *not* Friday? *that's* where you can buy *anything*."

"Friday Market when it's not Friday... I know you're lying about that, it's just an empty field on other days of the week. I've seen it."

"Nah, it's not in the same place."

The Indian's jaw dropped half an inch further. "If it's not on Friday, and it's not in the market, then why do they call it..."

"They use the same folding tables."

"Do you ever help with the smuggling? I mean, you have--*had*--a boat."

The Captain was now finishing up returning the boxes to some semblance of order, with the special lighter-than-normal box stashed somewhere in the very, very back. There really were some sick freaks in Kuwait these days, that was for sure.

"It ain't worth the risk. Regular Kuwaiti passengers pay much better. Although I did help out a few men from the North a while back who'd managed to get their own craft stuck on a sand bar. Wait, look at this--here's what they gave me in return. A brainy kid like you should get a kick out of it." He picked up the rucksack crumpled beside his mattress and pulled out the plastic bag-wrapped bundle,

pulling off layers of cotton and plastic. He handed the tablet within to the Indian, not removing it from its final transparent covering. The kid looked every bit as surprised as he'd hoped, and took the artifact from his hands with great care.

"Great Garuda! So when you say they were coming from the North..."

"That's right. What do you think it says?"

"Come on, I'm not *that* brainy. It could be anything, a verse from the Epic of Gilgamesh, a magical incantation, a letter to, I don't know, a king or something."

"I've spent a lot of time looking at it, and I think it may be a song. Don't ask me why."

"This should be kept safe in a museum."

"I'm sure it was in a perfectly nice museum a few months ago. A lot of good it did it." He grabbed the cuneiform-inscribed tablet back from his companion and wrapped it up again. "I was planning to take it to the Friday Market on Tuesday and see what I could get for it, but then I fell in love and my plans kind of changed." For some reason, that had a greater effect on the kid's composure than anything else he'd told him.

"Oh...k...ay. It's a good thing we're stuck with each other's company, Captain, it's going to take me a long time to understand you."

The knock on the door came without warning; they'd been expecting it for so long, they had given up on thinking about it. About time, the Captain said to himself, I could eat a dolphin. A Kuwaiti with a friendly face and a funny triangular *dishdasha*--this must be one of the other four, he vaguely remembered seeing him last night--opened without waiting for an answer and gave a little bow.

"Peace be upon you and good evening friends, I hope all is well with your quarters."

The Indian stood stiffly and offered his hand. "And upon you be peace. Your name was... Mohammed?"

Mohammed shook the offered hand and smiled. "Hello again Laxman. No, I'm Ali. I don't think there's anyone by the name of Mohammed in our group. I guess we beat the odds."

Ali reached for the Captain's hand as well. "And we definitely missed your name last night, friend."

The Indian beat him to it--"Just call him Captain. That's good enough."

"You're looking much better tonight, Captain. Hungry though, I'll wager; it's almost eleven out there in the real world."

They followed the stranger out of the coffee bean room at last.

Chapter Nine The First Divan (Or Meeting)

A side room of the coffee shop had been arranged for them, separated by a curtain of heavy cream-colored fabric from the main sitting area that muffled the blaring Superstation pop outside to an indecipherable slur. Someone had tried to make a decent conference table by pushing four of the miniscule round tables, designed to hold only two cups and two mobile phones, into a cluster at the center. Energetic abstract paintings featuring very wide brush strokes ('caffeine' being the apparent underlying theme) clung unnoticed to the walls behind a few potted palms, diffuse lighting banishing all shadows from the niche. Three clear plastic cups in various stages of coffee removal sat on the table cluster, along with two mobile phones--one the basic dark blue model that was carried everywhere in Kuwait by those who did not care much about mobiles, the other a much smaller and slimmer variety with a brushed titanium case, hi-res color screen, and built-in camera lens. Yasser, Katie and Rashid sat all on one side of the cluster, three empty chairs across from them.

"But seriously," Katie said gesturing at the

smaller mobile, "when was the last time you actually sent someone a photo from that?"

"I haven't ever. Sometimes my friends send me pictures of their girlfriends. At least that's what they say they are, even though the women usually aren't even looking at the camera." Rashid finished off the last of his drink and picked up the mobile, pushing a few buttons pointlessly. "But you know what they say in the TV ads: if you can't think of anything to do with a camera phone, your life just isn't interesting enough."

The muddy throb of the Superstation coalesced into a few seconds of clear--but no less indecipherable--music as Ali, Laxman and the Captain entered the room behind the curtain. The three at the table cluster lifted their cups and nodded in greeting to the newcomers. They filled the three empty chairs and the Captain dug through his rucksack, taking out his own dark blue mobile and setting it on the sub-table opposite Katie's so they wouldn't get them mixed up. Ali did the introductions in his own style.

"Welcome to all, and peace be upon you. Most of us know each other very well from last night--or at least feel we do--but the Captain here indicates that he would benefit from having his memory refreshed. Firstly, this is Rashid Ibn Hassan Al-Sabah, wastamancer extraordinaire, whom you both have to thank for your timely accommodation. This kind..."

Katie took over in the interest of moving things along. "This kind guy is Ken from Oz, and this one likes cats. Who wants coffee?"

Laxman and the Captain communicated by their shrugs that such a thing was far outside their budgets.

Rashid stood up. "Don't worry, the people who run this place are... friends of mine. The coffee's a gift of hospitality. Have you changed your mind, Ali?"

Ali shook his head with mild distaste. "No,

I'm still not certain why we even chose this place for such a momentous occasion. Coffee shops are fine--the Thousand and One were created in the coffeehouses of old, after all--but *this* place... it's like the very mascot of bland soul-destroying globalization."

"Stop complaining and have a frappa-wotzit," Katie answered, sucking the last of her own frappa-wotzit noisily. "They're great, almost exactly like the ones back in Australia."

Rashid returned after two minutes of debate between Ali and Katie, carrying a tray with drinks for the two newcomers as well as replacements for 'Ken' and himself. He told the newcomers exactly what they wanted to hear: "I also sent someone to get some food for you two. It should be here in a few minutes." He sat down to find a text message waiting for him on the color LCD of his mobile, from an unfamiliar number:

y does she dress lk a man?

Rashid began discreetly typing in a reply. Ali tapped the sub-table, causing it to rock unsteadily. "Now that we all have our chemical slurry, I do believe we may get started. Welcome to our little group's first divan."

Katie interrupted immediately. "Like a sofa?"

"No," Ali sighed, "divan as in a council of great import."

"Why don't we just call it a meeting? What is this, King Arthur's court?"

Ali's reply was cut short by the vibrations of the Captain's mobile, which made the little table rock yet again. The Captain mumbled something that may have been an apology and picked up the phone.

**i thnk she thnks we thnk shes a man.
jst pretend**

Chapter Ten

The First Divan (Or Meeting) Begins For Real

“As I was saying, welcome to our little group’s first hobnob session,” Ali started up again sarcastically. “Sorry. To get right to the point, do any of us know why we are here?”

The group looked at itself across the four tables in silence, albeit silence with a muffled pounding beat. Emboldened by the obvious cluelessness of the company he was keeping, Laxman spoke first. “I think,” he said, “we all know why we are here. We all felt the unmistakable force of destiny last night, there’s no doubt in my mind that the gods have brought us together for a reason. Not one of us hesitated to come here tonight and sit with complete strangers, just to discuss our experience, so I imagine what we each felt was more than a passing notion.” He shrugged.

“Well said, friend,” Ali replied, “I don’t think any of us can argue with that succinct rendering. We are six now, and we shall remain six until we complete our... destiny, as you say, although I think the word ‘purpose’ is less loaded. This we know to be a simple fact. When I asked why we are here, on the other hand, I meant just that--why. can anyone enlighten the rest of the group as to the nature of this... ‘purpose?’”

The niche returned to throbbing silence. It was finally Rashid who answered, spreading his arms wide.

“I take that to mean nobody has any special information then. I sure don’t, but I do have an idea. I get the feeling from what I’ve heard here that all of us are... not satisfied with the way things are in Kuwait, in one way or another. Doesn’t that mean we’ve probably come together to bring about a change?” He’d meant it to be a rhetorical question, but Laxman answered it before he could expand further.

“Not necessarily. I know I’m sure not

happy about this place, but I don’t feel any need to change anything, I just want to get out. How do you know we’re not meant to travel, the world is a big place and Kuwait is not the greatest part of it by far. Half of us don’t even come from here.”

Katie raised a hand. “I can see there are many possibilities, so let’s be logical about this. If the gods do have a purpose for us, I’m sure they have given at least one of us some idea of the plan. Otherwise it would defeat the purpose. We just have to work out which is the right idea to follow, and the way to start is by making a list of every one we can think of. Anybody have paper?”

Ali turned in his chair and picked up the scuffed leather briefcase from behind him, balancing it on one of the miniature tables. He opened it and pulled out a plastic comb-bound book of A4 paper about a centimeter thick, printed on in a tiny font. “The last few pages are blank. Here’s a pencil too.” He handed Katie the book printed side down along with a pencil of moderate length and put the case back on the floor next to his chair. Katie began writing on the top sheet of paper, holding it in her lap where the others couldn’t see it.

Idea 1 (picture-phone guy) = change Q8.

Idea 2 (sri lankan guy) = go somewhere else.

“Care to expand on your plan?” She gestured to Rashid. He sat up straight again, starting to speak slowly and gaining in speed as he drew their attention.

“Well, there are only six of us, but I believe we shouldn’t be afraid to aim high. Something needs to change in this country, in a big way. We all know that, and I felt from the moment we met at the Towers that we are the ones to do it. I get the inside perspective on the running of this place every day, so I can tell you all for certain that Kuwait is being run by puppets of foreign powers, has been for

two centuries in fact; the leaders are old, weak and decadent, a cause behind every problem we encounter in the country. We're sitting on some of the greatest oil wealth in the world, but we're giving it away for spare change." He swept his gaze across the table. "I know, you don't need me to tell you all that. It's common knowledge that the government is corrupt. Everyone talks about it, but nobody ever does anything about it. What's not so commonly known is its many weaknesses. It may sound crazy to talk about pitting ourselves against the government, but History shows that it is only the crazy ones who have what it takes to bring about real revolution!" He banged his fist on the table to emphasize the last word, aiming carefully for the center so as not to knock it over. His small audience broke into brief applause; his delivery had been excellent. After clapping, there was a pause while Katie partially erased and updated her notes.

Idea 1 (picture-phone guy) = Animal Farm.

"Right, I think that may be a winner. Anyone have an alternate idea? How about our second option of leaving town?" Laxman spoke up again. "I still think it's closer to the truth. Why fight to change this place when there are so many better lands to discover? At the Towers, I felt strongly that the destiny we were sensing lay somewhere beyond the seas, at the end of a long journey. If there's one thing the ancient sages taught me it's that anything worth finding must be found after a long journey. You agree, don't you, Captain?" He looked to his roommate hopefully. "Sure why not. Let's blow this joint. You and me have been here more than long enough, and God knows it would do the Kuwaitis some good to see the real world. Find me a boat and I'll sail us right outta here, leave the rest of the madmen to rot." Rashid could see they were getting distracted; he spoke rapidly. "We have this

whole country for the taking! Paradise isn't something you go looking for, it begins at home! I can tell you right now we won't find a single country on Earth that's any better than this one as it is right now. That's what we're here to change." That gave them all something to think about, which they did for a few moments.

"Um, can you add something to the list for me too?" Yasser asked softly. Everyone looked to him in unison. He blinked.

"Of course man, two isn't exactly a whole list. We need all the ideas we can get." Katie wrote beneath the first two items:

Idea 3 (quiet guy) =

The full sonic range of the music in the main room returned before Yasser could begin, bringing with it a young man in an official coffee shop uniform carrying a bulging paper bag and the smell of fast food. Rashid nodded to the man.

"Thanks, Just put it on the tables here for my friends."

Chapter Eleven

Laxman And The Captain Finally Break Their Fast At One In The Morning (Not Counting The Coffee)

The Captain tore at the pile of greasy fried chicken like he was in danger of it getting up and running away. Laxman made do with french fries and something labeled "coleslaw"; nobody had asked beforehand whether he was a vegetarian. It didn't matter, the chicken looked as thoroughly disgusting as the rest tasted. He was too hungry to care anyway.

Katie surveyed the wholesale destruction of the chicken carton. "Respect. Now for idea three..."

"Yes, well," Yasser picked up, "I was sort of thinking about, I don't know, going out into the desert. To start a farm or

something.”

Even the endless music outside seemed to fall silent for a moment.

Ali tried to smile. “What sort of farm would that be? A little unorthodox, out in the desert and all.”

“I... I’m not sure, I hadn’t thought too much about it. I just think the desert would be good, like leaving Kuwait but not completely. And kind of also like making our own paradise, or whatever Rashid was saying before. I don’t know, what do people usually farm out in the desert? They keep camels, right?”

Katie started to draw a line through the third item on the list without making it too obvious what she was doing. Then she stopped, tilted her head to one side for a few seconds, and leaped to her feet, predictably knocking over half of the table cluster. “That’s it! You’re brilliant! Oops, sorry.”

She picked up all the empty plastic cups, mobile phones and chicken bones that she had scattered around the niche before returning to her seat to explain. She couldn’t stand a mess like that. The others waited, baffled.

“Okay, I’m not *just* a Maths teacher.” That revelation didn’t provoke much in the way of astonishment.

“I spend a lot of my time cooking and selling pork products that I smuggle into the country from Australia.” A bit more of a reaction.

“On my last trip a couple weeks ago, I smuggled in a pair of live piglets, male and female. I’m raising them in my back courtyard.” Ah yes, there it was.

Ali was the first to reply in any coherent manner. “How *exactly* did you manage something like that?”

“Anaesthesia, some large suitcases with breathing tubes, a direct flight, and some friendly help from a fellow traveller in keeping the Customs guys busy. No worries, though it’s not an experience I’d

like to repeat anytime soon.”

“So you actually plan to raise and... breed them?” asked Rashid. He looked thoroughly impressed.

“I never thought that far ahead. It was just a challenge. I knew I wasn’t likely to stay in the country long enough to make much out of it, but I can always sell them to someone else and cover my expenses if I leave. The bigger problem is where to raise them. My courtyard is fine for two pigs, but the whole idea is for them to have lots of babies. Now we have this new plan, a farm in the desert...”

“It’s wonderful,” Yasser spoke up again, pleased to have something made of his idea. “We can farm pigs! Keeping the place secret will be easy, with Rashid’s *wasta*.”

“You know it!” Rashid was not one to pass up a compliment. “But... why? Pig farming is a long ways from revolution or journeys to other lands. Do you really think Destiny touched us last night just so we’d go into the pork business?”

Katie jumped on that one. “Let me tell you something about pork. Producing it would be more like gold mining than farming. Even with the cost of equipment, feed and water, our profits will be astronomical. He had it right when he talked about building our own paradise out there--we’ll be able to do anything we want. Away from this crazy city, we can think clearly about what we’re doing with ourselves and plan it properly. Then we’ll be in a position to launch our revolution, or continue travelling even farther away, or just stay there and build our own community. Anything.”

The Captain clapped his hands together and leaned forward. “I know the place for it.” He tapped the side of his head in the spot where he apparently imagined the knowledge to reside. “In the desert to the west--I’m certain I can find it. Beats the hell out of the coffee bean room. Good stuff, pig-smuggler.”

Ali stared into the empty fried-chicken

carton on the table in front of him as if he wished it were a crystal ball. He summed up the feelings of everyone at the table with uncharacteristic brevity. "Sure, at least it's a plan."

The mood in the room lightened tangibly once the decision had been made. The details were worked out, and it was agreed that there was no reason to wait around. Lingering feelings of purpose made them impatient, and the only thing more consolatory than planning was action. They would meet just after *Iftar* tomorrow night and say their goodbyes to life in Kuwait. The companions stood stiffly and filed out beyond the curtains; there was still time before morning to make some preparations. Katie was on her way out as well when Rashid grabbed her wrist, turning her back towards the table. He spoke slowly as he pointed to each vacated chair around the trash-littered cluster of tables. "Laxman. The Captain. Ali. Rashid. Yasser."

She gave him a crooked smile. "Thanks, I'll try to remember now." They followed the others out into the main coffee shop, still crowded and noisy, and through the front glass doors. Katie looked at her plain dark-blue mobile phone as she passed from the air conditioning into the warm night air. Its LCD still displayed an opened text message; she didn't remember receiving that. She stopped on the street's edge and lit up the little monochrome screen.

**i thnk she thnks we thnk shes a man.
jst pretend**

Chapter Twelve Into The Sands

ON THE THIRD NIGHT

* * * * *

*And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to IT for help--for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.*

--Omar Khayyam,
The Rubaiyat, Quatrain

72.

* * * * *

Ali sat in the back of a rusty white pickup truck bouncing down the Fahaheel Expressway with three Filipinos on their way home from work. The pickup trucks were the cheapest way to get around, much cheaper than taxis either official or amateur, but they could be hard to catch anywhere in the area of his flat in Salmiya. He'd been lucky tonight. The three were passing around foil containers of Filipino food and talking animatedly in their native tongue, *Iftar* having just been called. Two of the men had sat for the first few minutes of the ride in silence, straining not to miss the call over the wind in their ears, heads turning to follow the minaret of each mosque that passed by. The third man had laughed at their caution, crouching on the bed of the truck and spooning rice into his mouth between stoplights. That had been fairly brave of him, actually--he must not have guessed that the stranger riding with them might be a Kuwaiti. The penalties for eating in view of the public during fasting hours were quite severe, much more so for the lower classes of immigrants.

The truck dropped him on the edge of the Bayan residential area and sped off onto the Expressway again. He looked at the address he had written down and at the map posted at the top of the street, heading straight down the road towards the correct block. He carried his briefcase in one hand, and a duffle bag in the other--this was more or less everything he owned, mostly just clothing. Bayan was a residential area populated almost exclusively by Kuwaiti families of a more modest lifestyle (of course that was relative; the houses were still enormous by most standards.) A strange place for an Australian woman living alone to have her address. But then, nothing surprised him anymore about 'Ken'.

He quickly found the right street and house in the fading light. The gate was open and a dark green SUV sat outside, the back filled to the ceiling with boxes and supplies. Setting down his luggage, he rang the doorbell next to the gate and 'Ken' appeared almost instantly, wearing rubber gloves and an apron over her *dishdasha*.

"Ah, Ali, here you are just in time to help me get the pigs into the car." She pronounced his name like 'alley.'

"But of course. The flesh of swine may be unclean as stated in the Noble Quran, but don't worry, I'm not antipathetic to touching them. I can always wash my hands afterwards."

He followed her into the sparsely decorated house and through the kitchen to the illuminated back courtyard, which was indeed set up as a makeshift pigpen with a blue tarp covering one end. The smell was definitely something unique, but he'd better start getting used to it. Two small, stocky and hairless animals got up from their bedding in the corner and trundled towards them, emitting peculiar noises. Ali realized he'd never seen a pig before in real life, and had only the vaguest impressions of what one should look like.

"Alright, you grab Pink there--she's the female."

'Ken' reached for the male piglet, who changed his mind and took a step backwards when he saw they weren't here to feed him.

"Come on Floyd, I'm taking you somewhere much nicer. Don't get skittish now." She offered Floyd a carrot from her apron pocket, which was enough to keep him content while she picked him up and carried him out through the kitchen. Meanwhile, Pink sniffed Ali's slipper suspiciously. Ali snatched her up, making her squeal and squirm around frantically. He ran after 'Ken', holding the writhing animal at arm's length away from his clean *thob shillabat*.

They put the pair in the SUV on the floor of the backseat, glancing up and down the dark street to make sure nobody had noticed the transfer. Ali stuffed his duffel bag into a gap between the boxes in the 'cargo bay' (or whatever one was supposed to call the boot of an SUV), but took his briefcase with him to the front seat. 'Ken' tossed apron and rubber gloves on the backseat and ran back to the house to lock up. Returning, she jumped behind the wheel. "Seat-belts fastened back there? Good. We're off."

They drove in silence through Bayan, up the Fahaheel Expressway, and around the overpass onto the Fifth Ring Road westbound. Traffic was at its worst right about now, but at least it was moving almost as fast as ever. The omnipresent mavens and hotshots dodged and wove their way between lesser drivers at dazzling speeds, revelling in the challenge of the post-*Iftar* rush. Ali hoped his driver was up to the task; this was no place for your average Australian. She turned and looked him in the eyes for a brief second, attention snapping back to the road ahead as a sleek car screamed in front of them at close to twice their speed. She turned again long enough to speak.

"Ali, do you think of me as a man?"

He picked his words carefully. "I can if you wish me to. I like to think I'm very open-minded about... these sorts of things."

"No no, not like that. What I mean is... I'm not *actually* a man. Can you tell?"

"Yes, it's quite clear. I was under the impression you just liked the clothing."

She hit the steering wheel. "Shit. Listen to me, do you think *anyone* might take me for a man?"

"It's possible... I think. If you were standing very far away, or if they had particularly bad eyesight."

She hit the wheel twice more. "I don't get it, back home they always told me I have a

boyish figure. It must still be the haircut.”
“No, I’m sorry, I really don’t think it’s the haircut. To be perfectly frank, I don’t see any way you could possibly pass for a man. You just... look very female.”

“So you’re saying I’ve been making a complete fool of myself in every *Diwaniya* in Kuwait for the past five months?”

“You went to a *Diwaniya* like that? Oh my.”

She hit the steering wheel again, this time with her forehead.

“Alright,” she sighed after a moment of resignation, “I guess you can call me Katie now. That’s my real name. If I wasn’t on my way to live far out in the middle of the desert, I’d die of embarrassment.”

“Don’t worry about it, Katie. You did bring some ordinary clothes along with you, didn’t you?”

She gave a little laugh. “Yeah, I was planning to ‘reveal my secret’ and switch back to being female as soon as I got out there anyway. This *gatra* drives me crazy.” She pushed the double ring of black rope into place from where it had slipped on collision with the steering wheel.

After progressing beyond a certain point along the Fifth Ring Road, the traffic mercifully began to thin out until they were almost alone. A kilometer past the most outlying residential area--mostly still under construction--they came upon the site of an accident in the darkness. A truck lay on its side, leaking copious amounts of liquid that caused the road’s surface to reflect their headlights. Ali rolled down his window and sniffed. “Olive oil?” A very old man materialized out of the night and tottered up to Katie’s side of the car. She rolled her window down as well.

“Do you need help? Is anyone hurt?” she asked in Arabic.

“No, I am the only one. God is merciful. The other car drove away, but I can not.” He scratched his head, not looking too shaken, just sorrowful. His *gatra* was of the rough red-checked style, much like Ali’s in

fact. “Where are you two young men going tonight?”

Katie couldn’t resist firing a quick smirk at Ali.

“We are going out into the desert... to camp. Sorry, I don’t think we can take you into the city.”

“God is great! Please let me come with you into the desert!”

Katie and Ali looked at each other. “He must be blind as a bat!” Ali wondered.

“Oh, shut up.” She turned back to the old man. “Why do you want to go there?”

“Why do *you* want to go there?” he echoed.

She turned back to Ali. “You’ve got to admit, he’s very enigmatic. Whaddaya say? It’s always smart to have a crazy old man around for good luck, or so my mother used to tell me.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea--what about the pigs?”

“Listen, couldn’t this be part of the ‘purpose’ we’re all tied up in? What if this guy is supposed to be part of our group? Destiny couldn’t be much clearer than having him ask.”

Ali shrugged broadly. “That’s stretching the concept. I for one am not experiencing the same sense of import as at the Towers, and that feeling is what I now consider the calling card of destiny.”

“Maybe *he* feels it, and pleading to come with us is his crazy-old-man way of expressing it.”

“Let me talk to him, my Arabic may be more up to the task.” He leaned across to her window, where the old man was waiting expectantly. “Peace be upon you, friend. Do you wish to join us at our camp for any particular reason, or do you feel something telling you to go, something... bigger than yourself?”

He slowly chewed on something, or possibly nothing. “If I go, of course it is because God wills me to go. He is the all-knowing, the all-doing.”

That wasn’t what Ali had in mind. Following his usual course when trying to

decide something like this, he thought about the 'Thousand And One, trying to remember all the cases in which strangers were picked up along the trail side. Sometimes it turned out well, sometimes very, very bad, but always more interesting. That was how the 'Thousand And One was with most things, which was the big problem with using it as a guide. "Okay, get in. Welcome."

The old man hunched in the back seat, eyes locked on the two piglets. He gave no indication whether he knew what they were, or was just suspicious of them out of principle.

"Was it the second water tower after the Doha Spur where we're supposed to look for the marks, or the third?"

Ali rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you're planning to get us lost already. No, I'm sure it was the second, which if I'm not mistaken is that dusty specimen right there."

They turned off next to the faded inverted cone of concrete and found the line of white flour pointing down a poorly-maintained asphalt track leading straight into the night. Rashid had driven the Captain and Laxman out earlier in the afternoon, marking the path for the others as they drove. Yasser had preferred to travel alone; he said he had a lot to carry. Katie accelerated down the track, scanning the shoulder for more flour as their headlights passed over it.

"Excellent," said Ali, "they should have most of the camp set up by the time we get there. Rashid sounded confident about being able to get tents and other supplies, and I'm inclined to trust him on such matters."

Katie frowned. "I've been meaning to ask you about that. Rashid. Last night he was sounding a bit zealous, eh?"

"Ah, you refer to his dreams of usurpment and conquest. I wouldn't let him worry me, he's young and he's a Sabah. We can squash his enthusiasm if it starts to be a

problem, I know I didn't get into this for politics or guerilla warfare."

She leaned back and tapped the wheel. "So what is your excuse? I know, irrefutable sense of purpose yadda yadda, but really. You never added to the list last night, in fact you were almost as quiet as Yasser."

"I happen to know that if I asked you that question, you would say you're 'just along for the ride.'" Katie's blink told him he'd read her correctly. "I guess I could say the same thing. I'm just a lover of stories, and whatever may happen to us I think I'm going to be able to tell an extraordinary one when it's all over. Let the enthusiastic ones take the wheel, I say."

Chapter Thirteen

The Silence Of The Desert

The stretch of desert was remote from humanity, but not from the artefacts of human civilization. It had been previously used by the United States military stationed at Camp Doha and other, less publicized locations as an empty space to dump supplies and equipment they no longer needed. Judging by the look of it, they must have requisitioned an awful lot more tires than were necessary at some point in the past. Heavily treaded tires of all sizes, some of ridiculous enormity, were scattered half-buried in the sand as far as the eye could see. In between the tires lay an equal abundance of empty ammunition boxes, looking like miniature houses built in a miniature landscape of black basalt rocks and soft moon shadows. The makeshift camp lay in a hollow between two low ridges in the midst of the dump, lit by the Ramadan moon and a blazing campfire. A dark Bedouin-style tent had been set up with some reinforcement from a few of the tires, boxes of supplies and jerry-cans of water lined up along one side. The four figures sitting on tires around the fire and the many smaller figures sitting on

every available perch in the hollow were lit up even brighter for a short time by the headlights of a second SUV as it pulled up alongside the one that already sat parked at the foot of one ridge.

Ali and Katie jumped down onto the sand, their passenger climbing out of the backseat with difficulty. They left the headlights burning for the moment and walked to the edge of the fire. The four sitting around the fire looked at the strange old man; the new arrivals looked at the dozens of cats crouched all over the campsite. Nobody in either group saw fit to make a comment. Katie signaled to the group to follow her, leading them past the myriad stares of cats to one of the larger tires leaning up against the hillock opposite the tent. They all helped to tip the huge piece of debris on its side and roll it a short distance from the tent, letting it fall in a flat spot with a cloud of dust.

The two pigs were fetched and put in their new temporary pen with a carrot each and a blanket on top protecting them from the chilly air of a desert night. The group returned to the circle of firelight and joined the old man, pulling up extra tires. Still none of them talked. A white cat padded over and hopped up next to Yasser without a sound; another, a skinny black kitten with large ears, was curled up in Ali's lap before he'd even noticed it. A few other cats approached, but most kept at a safe distance from the flames despite the smells wafting in their smoke. The source of these smells was a grill set up over one side, pieces of chicken laid out on it. The Captain poked at one of them with a skewer meditatively. Rashid looked at the wizened stranger sitting next to him and then at Ali, arching his eyebrows. Ali shrugged. Rashid looked at Katie. Katie shrugged. Rashid shrugged. A stray breeze blew through the cinders of the camp fire, causing a miniature tornado of glowing ashes to dance over the sand to Yasser and

dash itself to pieces against his rubber seat, scaring the white cat away. Laxman got up to go to the bathroom.

A desert runner skittered behind one of the seats and grabbed a crumb of bread from their earlier meal in its serrated mandibles. A desert runner was a large black species of ant with very long legs. They survived in the harsh environment by covering exceptionally large territories in their nightly search for plant seeds and other bits of food, rushing over the sand at an incredible speed--for an animal of their size, at least. This particular runner had strayed even farther than usual from her nest tonight; she had not done so for any real reason involving the camp or its human and feline inhabitants, merely based on whatever inscrutable whims drove the mind of an ant. Now that she had found her prize of bread, she could not quite remember how to return to her home and sisters. She sniffed the ground with her five noses, trying to trace the scent of her own passage, but so many different and unfamiliar vapors filled the air--smoke, burning flesh, the various smells of large mammals--that even ten noses would not have been up to the task. The truth was, her tiny brain was overloaded. The runner fled from the light and smoke for clearer regions where she could get herself sorted out properly. Out there the lizards danced, leaving the rippling tracks of their passage crisscrossing between the military detritus as they hunted with ruthless skill. But she was not afraid; it is a fact that an ant fears nothing on Earth.

Laxman returned to the fireside and sat down. He threw another three pieces of wood--slats from an old packing crate stamped with cryptic military abbreviations, scavenged from another part of the dump--onto the coals and the dying flames sprang back with renewed vigor, catching a hapless chicken wing in

their hungry embrace. The Captain did not reveal any hard feelings as he stabbed the burning wing on his metal skewer, blew it out, and cast it over his shoulder. This was the starting flag for a brief race among the nearest eight cats, won by a fierce-looking tom with a truncated tail. He sauntered off into the hillocks with his only-half-charred prize, stubby tail held as high as he could manage, followed closely by two other hopeful cats. Katie started as if she had suddenly remembered something important. The others watched with interest as she lifted the double black ring and white cloth of her *gatra* off her head and tossed them both into the fire; the cloth disintegrated instantly, sending black flecks rising and floating away in the column of hot air, while the ring simply smouldered. They all smiled at her in what they hoped was an encouraging and accepting manner, except for the old man, who just didn't do that sort of thing even when he did know what was going on.

They sat for a while longer, Ali, Katie and their elderly ward partaking of the chicken once the Captain deemed it well-roasted. They threw their bones to the cats and leaned back away from the heat, satiated. Several of the group took to stargazing, a worthwhile pursuit way out here where the heavens were so full and visible despite the near-full phase of the moon. Yasser tracked orbital satellites as they fell across the span of stars, watching three pass over before working out what they actually were. Closer to the horizon, airplanes blinked their way along on unknown errands. Still the hush persisted. Laxman understood the meaning of their collective silence perfectly well--they had arrived, nothing more needed to be said for now. All of their discussion and preparation had come down to this camp fire in this little hollow; they were independent from Kuwait now, everything they did would be for themselves and on their own decision. The doing itself could wait, though. They

had won--he had too, at least won his safety. Still, the quiet was starting to go on longer than necessary and honestly it was kind of boring. Maybe this was the point at which everyone wanted to talk, but nobody wanted to be the first. He decided to say something and get it over with.

Chapter Fourteen

Camp Grain

"You should go take a look at the tent, the Captain and I set everything up. It's more than just a shelter, in fact we incorporated several wow facets." That hadn't quite come out right; this talking thing was harder after a long break. It sounded like something Ali would say.

Ali raised an eyebrow. That phrasing must have worked a lot better in Hindi, he thought to himself. "Okay... I look forward to them. It." Were they allowed to talk now? Might as well dive right in, this was turning into some kind of absurd coolness contest. "Alright! Enough! I surrender. What is *with* all of the cats?"

Rashid grinned a wide grin of victory. "Funny you should ask. You already know who we have to thank for them, I trust, so I'll let him explain the concept."

Yasser rubbed his arm nervously, trying to remember how he was going to put it. "Well, you know what they say about people and societies. That people are at their best when broken up into small groups of between thirty-five and fifty, because that's how we've lived through most of our history. In the savannah and stuff, you know. That's what anthropologists say, thirty-five to fifty. I read an article about it, our brains and social instincts are all built for living in tribes that big. So I thought, you know, that if we're starting our own thing out here then our group was too small by a lot. So I filled in the difference with some of

my cat friends.”

In most situations the digestive silence would have lasted for minutes, but everyone was in a particularly accepting mood tonight, and besides, they’d had enough silence for one night already.

“Right. How many, exactly?” Ali asked.

“Well the mean value of thirty-five and fifty is forty-two, minus six of us equals thirty-six cats. I didn’t know you were planning on bringing a friend as well, so I didn’t account for him.”

Katie gave her first input, sounding just a bit underappreciated. “What about Pink and Floyd... the pigs, I mean?”

“I thought about that, but I don’t think we count any of the pigs as part of our tribe when we’re planning on, you know, killing them.”

A matter of more practical relevance struck Ali. “How did you get them all out here?” As soon as he’d asked the question, he remembered the open-backed truck a few kilometers back along the unpaved desert track that Katie and he had commented on—it had been stuck firmly in a patch of deep sand. “Oh, never mind, we saw your transport. I guess we can pull it out in the daylight.”

Yasser scratched his neck sheepishly. “Yeah thanks, I think it’s stuck. Any more questions? You can learn all of their names later.”

Katie had started to worry about something, so she spoke up. “Won’t this many predators have a bad impact on the local environment?” The

Ali laughed at her concern for the ecosystem. He raised the empty ammunition box Rashid had been using as a small table. “Local environment indeed. This isn’t nature, it’s a dump—a man-made wasteland. There may be a few bugs and lizards out there, but the cats aren’t going to damage anything that the sheep and the United States Army haven’t already destroyed, right Yasser?”

Yasser nodded. The fire burned lower.

Ali slapped his *thob*-covered knee, waking up the kitten curled in his lap. It yawned and fell back asleep. “So it’s settled, this farm shall be a haven for cats and humans alike to live in harmony. The next order of business then is what we should call our little community.”

“No,” Laxman cut in, “the next order of business is *who in Kali’s name* is this old man?” They all looked to the sullen stranger wrapped in his thin shawl; he continued to steadfastly ignore them in favor of the flickering light of the flames and his string of black prayer beads.

“Nobody really,” Katie answered, “he just asked to come with us and we didn’t have the heart to turn him down. A crazy old man won’t be any more trouble to have around than a bunch of cats, especially if he’s planning to sit on his tire and do nothing like this all the time.”

“Alright, you can keep him, but don’t expect us to look after him for you,” replied Rashid mockingly.

Ali couldn’t remember any more why they had decided to bring the man along, and he wasn’t about to back Katie up on the decision. It was her idea in the first place. Right now he was more interested in giving this place a proper name.

“As I was saying, a naming. Does anyone present know of the title Grain?” he asked with gravity.

Yasser raised his hand. “Isn’t that what Kuwait is called on the really old maps?”

“Yes, precisely. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century it was the common European spelling for *Al-Qurain*, the original name of Kuwait. *Qurain* means ‘small hill’, of course, and *Kuwait* is ‘small fort’. So I was thinking, if we’re symbolically starting over, we could call our farm by the old title. We do have a bit of a small hill here, two in fact.” He gestured to the gravelly ridges that shielded their camp.

Rashid frowned. “Then why use the European version? What’s wrong with *Al-Qurain*?”

Ali shrugged. That was the tricky part; to be honest he really just liked the way 'Grain' sounded. "That name has already been taken, both for the original city and more recently for the thoroughly nondescript new housing development in the south of town. It really made me wax exceedingly wroth when they announced that, I can tell you. Grain on the other hand was never the real title of anywhere, just a semi-mythical spot on some Dutch and English sea charts."

"I for one like it," said Laxman, "Camp Grain sounds very... fertile." He turned as if to survey the sandblown expanse of debris surrounding them. "Optimistic." He raised a hand which was followed by six other hands, including Rashid's (who saw the wisdom in Ali's point) and, surprisingly, the old man's bony fingers. He still didn't give any indication that he understood or was even paying attention to them; he was probably just raising it out of some confused reflex. Whatever the case, the name was decided.

Excepting the old man the circle stood and broke up, having covered the salient points of explanation and decision. Rashid and the Captain departed with flashlights to find more firewood to have in stock for the pre-dawn hours and the early morning meal. Katie fed the pigs from one of the sealed buckets of various grain meals and slightly over-ripe vegetables scavenged from the market that she had brought along in the back of her SUV. Ali went to the Bedouin tent to discover the nature of its 'wow facets'--which he did in fact find suitably impressive--while Laxman helpfully unloaded Katie's baggage and pig farming-related equipment. Yasser wandered around the outskirts of the hollow checking on the cats and making notes in his book. They looked to be settling in well to their new environment. This would normally be too high a concentration of cats in one spot to expect much peace, but under his aegis they were

learning to get along. He was surprised that none of his human companions had made the obvious comment: *Felis catus* is not a very social species, at least not on the thirty-five-to-fifty scale of *Homo sapiens*. But this group were going to learn, if Yasser had anything to do with it.

The Abbess trotted alongside him, meowing softly; Green-Eyes, Maagi The Loquacious and Obsidian followed not far behind. He had brought to Camp Grain most of the cats he regularly kept up with in the city, but he hadn't put too big a dent in the overall population--there were arguably more cats than people in Kuwait. It really was their city; the people were just a resource they lived off of, as the humans themselves lived off the oil beneath the ground. That was one point he was always trying to make on the website. He felt a brief moment of regret for having to abandon the Kuwait Feline Chronicles, the page he habitually updated on a daily basis with pictures and stories from the real Kuwait, the city between the city. That was just a hobby anyway, that and the online cat-lovers' forums on which he spent so much time discussing matters feline with people who usually annoyingly insisted on thinking of cats as nothing more than house-pets. The University was an even less important hobby, one that he felt no such compunction for leaving behind; some of the biology he found interesting, but he'd rather be a pig farmer than work for the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research any day.

Maagi The Loquacious sped ahead of him towards some random spot in the night with a burst of speed. Yasser hoped the cats wouldn't cause any real problems for Camp Grain, or begin to create discord. They shouldn't trouble the pigs at all--this bunch were only used to hunting garbage scraps and the occasional lizard, they gave a wide berth to anything close to their own size that didn't smell quite right. There

would be a bit of extra expense for food on the weekly city runs they were planning to schedule, but if that girl--he should have asked her real name now that she *was* a girl--was to be believed then they would be rolling in pork money before long. Maagi The Loquacious returned to his entourage proudly, a thin scaly whip of a tail swinging to and fro between her front teeth.

Chapter Fifteen

Firewood

The Captain wasn't going near anything metallic unless he could tell by looking at it exactly what it was. Take that sinister scrap glinting in the flashlight beam: it looked like a bent spoon, but how could he be sure? The Military shouldn't be getting rid of their land mines or cluster bombs or daisy-cutters out here, but you could never trust those Americans with anything, least of all your life. It would be just like them to leave some live warheads or vials of anthrax and smallpox lying around in the sand. Only a runaway camel might step on anything in this stretch of desert, that and a pig farmer searching for firewood in the middle of the night.

Rashid leaned over and picked up the metal scrap as he walked past, not exploding in a maelstrom of searing heat. He grinned darkly and held up the benign device.

"Just as I feared, the Americans have been training an elite corps of psychic warriors out at Camp Doha! They must be using their growing telekinetic powers to slowly take over Kuwait even as we speak!"

The Captain tried to ignore the smartass and get his heart rate back to normal. That kid was going to blow them both to pieces next time. So many potential disasters, so little wood; they would definitely have to start bringing it in with their weekly loads.

No problem, the construction sites all over the city were full of leftover scraps. He walked around the side of a mammoth tire that lay in their path and shone his beam about hopefully. Nothing but those damned metal bullet-boxes and two suspiciously land-mine-like steel lumps. "Whatever you do, *do not* touch those things. I'm sure that's what a mine looks like." Wait, where was the smartass now? Rashid was running ahead, light beam fixed on the listing skeleton of some rickety structure just up ahead.

Rashid had guessed well; the old frame was built entirely of nailed-together wooden beams and boards, dried and warped from the desert sun. It had once been a shelter or shed of some sort, probably older than the dump itself. They climbed inside, testing each board cautiously, stepping on the foundation beams where the floor had collapsed down to the sand beneath. Rashid pried at a piece, pleased with himself. "Oh yeah, that's a lot of wood! We can go for months on this! Excellent." The Captain liked wood as much as the next guy, but he didn't know if the find was worth such celebration. Rashid sounded like he'd just struck oil--although that expression was rarely heard around Kuwait, where even wood was scarcer than oil. He yanked a board off the two rusted nails that held it with a noisy *crack*. No sense in carrying more than was necessary for tonight; someone else could walk down tomorrow and haul back all they wished if they really wanted to stock up.

The two scavengers quickly piled up two small bundles of loose wood which they fastened with some cord they had brought along from camp. The Captain circled the outside of the structure, trying to guess what purpose it might once have served. Something shone in his light beneath the broken floorboards--definitely not an explosive device this time, but it was a

weapon: a Military-type folding knife. Must be some special Military name for those, but he'd be damned if he knew what it was. He picked it up, messed around with it a bit, and stuck it in his pocket. It was good quality, not the least bit rusted. He climbed through the middle of the creaking structure and back to the front where the smartass was waiting for him.

"Ready to carry this back? Or does the wood look more woody on the other side?"

The Captain ignored the comment--he could take sarcasm, but it had to be at least *remotely* clever. A travesty like *that* just showed a lack of respect. He picked up the smaller of the two bundles and began tracing his steps back in the direction of Camp Grain.

Rashid hurried to catch up with him, jumping over a tire with his wood clacking together. He switched the strap to his right hand to keep the bundle from hitting the expensive mobile he still wore hooked on his belt. This guy was too much. The Captain pointed to the phone.

"Please don't tell me you can use that thing out here."

"Nah, no coverage this far out. I just forget it's there most of the time."

"Thank God, I don't think I would have been able to handle it if you were to suddenly get a call while sitting by the fire. It would drive me to throw it into the flames right away."

Rashid gave a somewhat nervous giggle. "It's not that bad, some modern technology can be useful. Don't fight it and you may find that your life becomes a bit easier."

"Modern, eh. Don't forget that we're pig farmers now, and we may still be pig farmers after that city with all its mobile phones falls to pieces."

The smartass looked at him more seriously. "So you're one of the doomsayers. I know, the oil will run out

sometime, sooner rather than later the way the government's giving it away. But these guys are smart--I should know, most of them are in my family. I find it hard to believe that Kuwait will just disappear. Not that I wouldn't like to see that happen sometimes."

The Captain looked to the heavens; he'd had this exact same discussion a hundred times, on a hundred sunny boat cruises, with a hundred arrogant Kuwaitis. Arrogant and blind.

"No offense, but all your family's clever foreign investments aren't worth a damn. Do you know anything about desalination plants?"

"You mean the sea-water treatment places? What about them?" He had his attention now.

"Those plants are the only thing keeping that goddamned city alive. If they were shut down, Kuwait would be as abandoned as Failaka Island within a week. You can't run a city without water, and you can't run a desalination plant without a whole shitload of oil to power it. Don't try to argue on that, I have friends in the business. It takes a *whole* shitload."

"So that's it, when the oil goes the water will go with it?" Still sounded a bit skeptical.

"Hah, it wouldn't even take that. Desal plants are fragile beasts."

"What, now you're saying some sort of terrorists might blow them up? That *is* a bit hard to swallow, surely they could build more."

"Shut up and listen, kid. Desal plants get clogged up fast if the water's not clean and clear. Let's say there was an oil spill off the coast, maybe not such a stretch considering the number of tankers running in and out. That would do the trick for a good long while, make the place uninhabitable for years."

"Then?" Rashid had stopped walking and set his firewood on an ammo box.

"How I see it, the oil field villages would probably stay for as long as the pumping

was good--maybe the pig farms too, hehe--but the city and all its crap would be done for good. The Kuwaitis would still have their investments and oil revenues but they'd be settled somewhere nice over in Europe and coming back to this shithole wouldn't sound so nice after a couple summers in Rome. There are bigger groups of refugees than that in the world, take it from a Hebron boy. And not filthy rich ones, either."

The astounded look on the Sabah kid's face vindicated his theory. This was a kid who knew the Kuwaiti mindset inside and out, and he knew the Captain was absolutely right.

"It would be so easy... everything would be gone. Kuwait sure is lucky that you're not a terrorist."

They hefted their loads again and continued following their footprints in reverse, the twin parallel hills of Camp Grain becoming obvious only once they drew very close. They would all have to be careful when straying from camp, it would be a cinch to get hopelessly lost out here.

Chapter Sixteen

Fur And Freedom Fighters

Ali stumbled out of the spacious Bedouin-style tent, dazzled by the ingenuity of its wow facets. How did the Indian come up with all that stuff? He couldn't imagine that the Captain had had much to do with it. That one facet with the... Wow, it boggled the mind. Blinking away the darkness, he could see Laxman and Katie taking inventory over by the cars; he gave them a thumbs-up and headed to the opposite end of camp, where he thought he could just make out Yasser looking after his precious cats. He felt like it was his duty to make the diffident 'reporter' feel more comfortable, maybe even get him to talk a bit more. He was definitely

an interesting specimen.

"So Tail Must Die is the champion lizard hunter around Grain, eh? We'll see about that. I have a funny feeling the Thief may give him a run for his money. I've seen her catch rats half her size back on Mubarak Al-Kabeer Street." The guy was either chatting to himself, or to a brown-striped cat with a missing ear; Ali couldn't decide which would be stranger. He kicked an ammo box clumsily so as not to sneak up on him. Yasser turned around to see who was approaching, as did the cat he seemed to be conversing with. "Oh, hi. Just checking on the tribe. This is the Dude. Haha, it's just a name from a movie I saw right before I met him, seemed to fit. Some of the names are kind of stupid, but I have to call them *something*."

That was the most he'd ever heard Yasser say at one time, excepting his famous 'thirty-five to fifty' speech. He seemed much more easygoing around the cats, a few degrees less of an introvert. Ali bent over with his hands on his knees and looked the Dude in the eye. The ugly cat blinked.

"The Dude, eh. I don't think I'll have any trouble remembering that face."

"Hah, true. I happen to know he had a nasty run-in with a garbage truck. It was his own fault for falling asleep in the dumpster like that. Not the smartest feline in Bnaid Al-Gar, but strong enough to take on anycat in a fight, and lazy enough not to."

Ali wondered how much of this he was making up. "How do you know about the garbage truck? Did you see it happen, or did the Dude... tell you?"

Yasser rolled his eyes. "Come on, I'm not crazy! Sure, I may talk to the cats every once in a while, but unfortunately I've never heard one talk back. I am a reporter though, and I know how to sniff out my story--In the Dude's case I knew his tendency for sleeping where he ate, so I interviewed the garbage men."

The black kitten with the big white ears hopped out from the hollow of a tire and rushed over, kicking sand behind it, flopping down in front of Ali with a demanding *meow*. He picked it up and scratched behind its voluminous ears, but it had other ideas--it climbed up his arm to his shoulder and then to the top of his checked *gatra*-covered head where it splayed out, feet dangling, scanning the distant inky horizon. Yasser chuckled at Ali's surprise. "Ears Of Destiny--she seems to be picking up a bit of human imprinting. I guess that's only to be expected in our new multi-species society of Camp Grain."

Ali looked up, seeing only a single paw hanging into his field of vision. "And here I thought she was just being a kitten."

"Oh no, a kitten who acted like that around every human who came along wouldn't last two minutes in the streets. She's acting like a *pet* kitten."

"You don't like the *p*-word, then. Funny for a guy with thirty-six of them." That had come out sounding a bit more confrontational than he'd meant it to. Yasser wrinkled his nose in distaste at the remark.

"I don't own any of them. You can't *own* a cat, even if you think you do. They would get on just as well without me. I just follow them around and look for their stories. You do the same thing with humans, does that make them your pets?"

Ooh, this guy was more perceptive than he looked. Ali clapped three times.

"Well said. I think the only difference between us is that you're actually succeeding in finding the stories--maybe it's time for me to switch species too."

Yasser walked a few meters to a lone cluster of upended tires and sat down. This discussion was about to get heavy.

"I gave up on the people in Kuwait a while ago. The way I see it, stories come out of facing adversity and even tragedy. Heaven

is a place where nothing ever happens, as they say. When people find themselves in almost total control over their surroundings--as in Kuwait--they get comfortable, and they lose the spark of... whatever."

Ali had never thought of the problem in quite that way. He had thought about it in plenty of other ways, of course.

"And that's when mundanity vanquishes all of the heroes and villains alike in one cruelly indifferent sweep of its razor-sharp sword."

"I... guess you could say that. Our Al-Sabah friend may beg to differ on the 'villains' point though."

Ali kicked an ammo box over on its side.

"Come on! Politics is something else entirely. I don't know about you, but I have no intentions of signing up for any utopian revolutions. That sort of thing is only good for high farce and tragicomedy, and only when someone else is doing it."

Yasser gestured to the upset green metal case. "So what about all that then? The glory of battle? Kuwait's seen a bit of it in past decades."

He hoped the reporter was just trying to provoke his thinking with a bit of friendly debate and didn't actually believe what he was saying.

"*Glory*... Maybe once, long ago. Even the Thousand and One hardly mention a single act of warfare, and there was more than enough going on in those days. When it's spoken of it is as a disaster of nature, something the story continues despite of. And that was long before the days of shock-and-awe, air strikes and computer-controlled drones, not to mention propaganda-by-deed."

"What's that last one? I read a lot of Iraq news on the 'net, but that's one strategy I haven't heard of."

"Nor would I have expected you to. It is the sole legacy of a forgotten group of 19th-century Russian anarchists, but the original name of the tactic has been largely lost to History. The Tsar's own

propagandists coined another, much catchier term for it: terrorism.”

Yasser stared for a short interlude at the ammunition box, which now had a cat sitting on it as if eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Okay, so war is just politics with a bigger blast radius. I definitely agree with that. But aren’t there some stories that come out of it? What about the Kuwaiti freedom fighters who went underground in ninety-one, dying for their families against hopeless odds? I was young then and I was sent out of the country like most, but I remember the legendary image they had.”

“That reminds me of the words Charles Mackay wrote about one of the later Crusades: that it was ‘sung of only, but never spoken of’. No, sorry, that’s far too harsh! Pardon me for not being able to pass up a good quotation. I’ll have to concede this point--they did what they had to do, and gave their lives nobly. That’s a story. It’s just not the sort of story I prefer, and I find it hard to believe that warfare is the only way out of the mundane. Now let’s change the subject before you try and ask me the same question about the *Iraqi* freedom fighters. What are you anyway, Rashid’s recruitment officer?!”

Yasser stood. “No hard feelings, just making conversation. I can see the two of us think much alike--why do you think I like cats, with their lack of combat on all but the most personal scale? Speaking of cats, I have three more to track down now. You can come along if you want.”

They spotted the three sets of glowing yellow eyes not far away. A dark brown cat with an unusually long-haired tail, a white one with almost no tail, and a yellow one with a perfectly normal tail. Yasser indicated each one in turn. “Sparrow, Mighty Paw and Flycatcher. Having a men’s Diwaniya by the looks of it--usually wherever Sparrow is the Abbess is nearby.” He wrote something to that effect in his notebook. The three tomcats

got up off their haunches and circled them with quiet *meows*. After a few revolutions they stopped short, seeing someone else approaching. It was Rashid and the Captain returning from their firewood search--a very successful one, by the looks of the bundles they were carrying. The Captain was wearing what appeared to be a soldier’s helmet.

“Hail, Grainites. I see you found some headgear out in the wastes, as well as an abundance of fuel.”

The Captain squinted at him. “Yeah, your headgear is classy too, but I don’t think it would protect you as well from shrapnel.”

Ali looked upwards, noticing once more the paw dangling over the edge of his *gatra*. “Oh my! I’d completely forgotten about Ears Of Destiny. Fast asleep, I imagine?”

Rashid squinted as well at the mention of the sleeping kitten’s name. “Nice one Yasser. Now if you will excuse us, we were planning to take this rather heavy wood to the fire and get it going again.”

The four walked back towards the light of the little camp together, Sparrow, Mighty Paw and Flycatcher following alongside. A fire would feel good right about now; the chill in the air was building.

Chapter Seventeen

No Worries

They may have to make their first run into town sooner than they had planned. It was hard to believe the amount of stuff none of them had given the slightest thought to bring with them; now that they were out here, it all seemed so obvious. Laxman helped himself to another chocolate biscuit from the package between him and Katie--that was one thing they *had* managed to bring more than enough of, biscuits.

“Who brought all these things? There must be a dozen different boxes, and I know I’m not responsible for any of

them.”

Katie took one for herself, biting off half and talking with her mouth full. “Don’t look at me. I can’t believe we would remember choc biscuits and forget all about matches. We’d be living off the biscuits alone if Rashid hadn’t had his lighter, though I still don’t understand why he *does* have a lighter when he claims not to smoke.”

They were lounging against one side of the tent, contemplating the wow-befaceted space in the dim glow of a single lantern. One of these days they would have to break down and buy a generator, but for now everyone in the group seemed happy enough to live more simply and primitively in exchange for a bit of peace and quiet.

“It’s bloody wonderful out here though, isn’t it?” Katie sighed, “we’re on our own now, living the desert life, being what we want to be, taking things the way they come. It would be nice to have some alcohol though, I’m damned thirsty.”

Laxman laughed. “Then brew some of your own right here in the Grain Brewery, I’m sure the Captain wouldn’t complain. Isn’t that what all you Westerners do?”

“Now you’re thinking. I might have to bring some gear out and give it a try, even though my few attempts so far have been disasters on a monumental scale.”

She ate the rest of her biscuit. Laxman felt a lot more comfortable around her now that she was an admitted female, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt sporting the logo of some running club in Perth. It didn’t seem so much like she was trying to hide something from them all the time. In fact, he was growing more attached to the whole group—he may not really be any closer to his goal in the lands of India, but he had definitely landed on his feet.

“So what do you think,” he asked, “is Camp Grain it? Is all of this what we felt at the Towers two nights ago?”

She stared at the sliver of moonlight shining around the front flap of the tent for a long while. Perhaps he should have

worked out a better segue from home-brewing to Destiny. He answered for her.

“I’ve been wondering about that since you and Yasser came up with the idea, and I definitely can’t say I’ve felt the same feeling yet, but I am excited about this place. Maybe it’s just because we’ve actually done something for real. Then again, it doesn’t feel wrong at all—one would think that if this really wasn’t what the gods had in mind, they would make things very difficult for us.”

Katie stood and brushed chocolate-flavored crumbs off of her ‘Perth H3’ sweatshirt. “No worries. Let’s get off our bums and go see if the others need our help with anything. You’ll have to tell me about your gods sometime, I know far too little about the Hindu religion.”

They emerged from the tent and stood contemplating the glowing embers of the campfire.

“Hey,” Katie exclaimed, “the weird old guy’s finally moved from his tire. Wonder where he’s gone off to.” He followed her around the perimeter of the campsite, peering into the gloom. “Hey, old guy!” she shouted. “I don’t even know what his name is. I’d feel horrid if he fell into a hole or something.”

Eventually they circled around to the makeshift pigpen. The thick wooly blanket they had used to cover it from the wind was lying in a dusty heap to one side. They dashed up to the huge tire and peered inside; Floyd looked back at them glumly, snorting. The female was nowhere in the pen.

“So,” Laxman said to the openmouthed Katie, “you were saying you wanted to learn something about my gods?”

Chapter Eighteen

Karma

The four other remaining human inhabitants of Camp Grain dropped the bundles of wood they were carrying between them and came running when they heard Katie's shouted profanities of rage. They took one look into the pigpen and understood the implications of her state of fury at once.

"Did it escape?" Ali asked unhelpfully.

"No! That old bastard stole Pink! Son of a..."

"Settle down," Rashid intervened, "how far could he seriously have walked out here carrying a pig? He's like ninety."

Katie considered that point and took some comfort in it, quieting down. Then Ali ruined it for her.

"That depends on whether he's just confused or has some sort of plan in mind," he answered to Rashid's rhetorical question. "If he wandered off into the desert, he shouldn't have gotten too far. If he was thinking straight at all, though, he would have headed for Yasser's truck. You left the keys in it, right?"

Yasser closed his eyes painfully. "Yes, thank you for reminding me. I thought... I thought we would go right back to pull it out or something, but then I got into helping set up camp and..."

"That's right! It was stuck!" cried Katie, "one old man couldn't get it out!"

That was true, Laxman thought, it would be a challenge. Maybe not altogether impossible, though. "One of us should drive down and check--the rest can search around here, look for a trail or something. The old man's probably stumbling around just on the other side of the ridge somewhere."

"Good leadership skills, man," Rashid said and started walking to the two SUVs at the far end of the camp. "I'll be back in a minute."

Laxman walked with Yasser to the top of the steep ridge. Since nobody knew the elderly pig-napper's name anyway, they decided it was best to just be quiet and not scare him away; there was no way to be sure he really wanted to be found. Laxman had to admit that Yasser was a whole lot better at the whole stealth thing, moving up the loose scree of the hillside without a sound like, well, a cat. It was easy to see where he had learned his tricks. Laxman's foot in its cheap tennis shoe slipped and caused a small noisy avalanche of stones and sand. Indra curse these shoes! Yasser turned and shrugged silently.

"Don't worry too much about being stealthy, I'm just doing it out of habit. Our friend didn't look to me like someone who could hear us from very far away."

Laxman whispered back, "true, and even if he does I think we can manage to catch up with him somehow. Katie's over-reacting a bit, if you ask me."

"But you can't argue that if we lose that little pig, we're definitely screwed."

They reached the top of the hill and scanned the surrounding territory. It wasn't actually as good an idea as it had seemed on the spur of the moment--far too dark to see any detail very far away, despite the near-full moon. He thought he could make out the shape of Yasser's truck a little ways down the desert track, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. Those headlight beams were definitely Rashid's though, and those smaller flashes in the other direction were coming from the other searchers. Oh yes, that would have been a good idea.

"We forgot the flashlights, didn't we? I'll go back and get them, then we can search on the other side of the hill." Yasser grabbed his arm before he could turn to leave. He spoke in a thin, low voice.

"No... trust me on this, we're better off without them. Just open your eyes very wide like a cat, concentrate on making maximum use of the photons at your disposal. Try not to look directly at the

moon or any other lights. Your eyes will adjust more than you think.”

He wasn’t sure this was the place or time for this ninja stuff, but his companion seemed to know what he was talking about now; in fact, he was looking downright self-confident all of a sudden. The darkness was obviously his element. He tried following the advice--what was it, don’t look at the cats, try to be a photon and maximize the moon? No, something like that--but he still couldn’t see a thing.

“Rashid’s coming back now, and he’s driving *really fast!*” Yasser hissed. True, the headlight beams were returning now, bouncing frantically.

“You call that *fast*? I can tell you’ve never ridden with him. On the Fifth Ring Road this afternoon he...”

The stealthy cat-man was already hopping and running down into camp; Laxman slid after him amongst a clatter of stones.

They were the first to reach the SUV, and the fact that Rashid was still sitting in the driver’s seat with the engine running was not encouraging. He rolled down the electric window, showing the even less encouraging look of supreme annoyance on his face.

“Well the old shit did it, somehow. Please tell me Yasser, was there any water in that truck, or just cats?”

Yasser gave a perplexed frown. “Yes, there was one of those... big blue plastic things in the back that looked like it was probably full of water. It was there when my cousin let me borrow the truck. I tried to pull it out before I left home but, but it was too heavy for me.”

Rashid was in a bad mood over this. “Well it doesn’t appear to have been too heavy for our ninety-five-year-old friend. There’s a patch of damp sand now where the truck should have been.”

Yasser’s eyes, already downcast with shame, widened a little. “So, so that’s all it takes to get a truck out of loose sand, getting it wet? I... I could have had the

truck out hours ago. I feel so stupid.”

Laxman was skeptical, although he was far from an expert in these matters. He’d been stuck in the sand once or twice with his father in construction sites around town. “I’ve never heard of that solution. Where did you and the old man learn this?”

“Oh it’s well enough known amongst desert drivers, but *nobody* ever mentions it because it requires loads of water to work. Pouring that much of your water supplies on the ground in the desert is usually dangerously stupid, and seems more than a little sacrilegious too.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’ve heard some call it ‘the dead man’s escape.’”

They nodded gravely. These desert drivers really took their safety precautions seriously.

Katie, Ali and the Captain all arrived at once, out of breath. Their faces fell as well when they saw the gloomy little group.

“So he’s gone?”

“Definitely. Nothing but damp sand.”

The Captain actually took a step backwards in shock. “You’re not saying the bloody fool used... *the dead man’s escape*?! He’s a maniac!”

“I’m afraid so. Only a confused old man would take such a desperate step. Poor guy, got to feel sorry for the dotard.”

There followed a spontaneous moment of silence, broken after a good thirty seconds by Katie. “Alright, what does that mean? You guys are scaring me!”

Laxman filled her and Ali in, minus the inflections of doom. “It means he poured some water on the sand so he could get unstuck. Now he’s gone. And he doesn’t have any water, I guess.”

Katie stamped her foot five times in rage and uttered an unintelligible growl. “Any ideas where the asshole might have taken my Pink then?”

Rashid bit his lip, thinking. “You’re the one who knows everything about him. Want to share with the group?”

“Well, we found him on the road up here.

Ali was there too. He had been driving a big truck and he said he had run into another car..."

"Olive oil," Ali interjected.

"...That's right, his truck was leaking olive oil all over the road. He asked..."

"Olive oil!" the Captain exclaimed.

"...That's what I said, it was leaking..."

"Olive oil!" he repeated. "I buy that black-market stuff at Friday Market, the guys usually stock it on Saturday mornings and sell out within a few hours. It's the cheapest you can get."

"So what does that mean to us?" Rashid asked impatiently. The engine was still running.

"There's only one place a man smuggling olive oil would be coming from." He pointed in a precise direction that was meaningless to the others, who could not read their bearings in the stars. "Basrah."

Chapter Nineteen

The North Road

Yasser didn't know much about SUVs, but he was fairly certain that they weren't designed to go quite this fast. They shot up the highway at a speed that was only viable because the road was perfectly straight for most of its length, stretching across the barren wastes to the Iraqi border. This was the continuation of the same highway he had driven up coming to Camp Grain earlier in the afternoon; he hadn't realized at that time where it eventually headed. The desert here looked blank and sparse after the littered expanse around their camp--there were a few small shrubs and grasses and the topsoil still held in places, but most of it had been turned to sand by years of overgrazing. Tendrils of this sand wafted across the road's surface in the night breeze, though hopefully not enough had built up yet to present a hazard to their rapidly-moving vehicle. Yasser sat in the backseat sandwiched between Ali and

Laxman, the three of them clinging to the front seats for dear life. The Captain was in the front next to Rashid, and Katie bounced around in the rear trying to calm Floyd's nerves. She had insisted on bringing the male pig along--there was no way she was going to lose *both* halves of her precious breeding pair in one night. Yasser wondered for a moment whether he should have brought some of the cats, maybe Ears Of Destiny at least. No, they were street cats, they could handle themselves for a little while. He hoped it would only be a little while anyway.

"So what is our plan here? I mean, I doubt he'll get far before we catch up with him at this speed, but supposing he does make it across the border... will we follow him all the way?" The way Ali said it sounded almost wishful, as if the Basrah at the far end of this highway was the same magical city featured in his beloved Thousand and One. He would be in for a surprise.

"We'll see. I really doubt we could make it past the border guards even if we wanted to, they are Americans and carry very large guns." Rashid always had to ruin everyone's fun, didn't he. "We might not even get through the checkpoint near the turnoff for the Sulaibkhat Desal Plant, if we're really unlucky and it's manned tonight. Those guys can be real..."

"TAIL LIGHTS DEAD AHEAAAAAD!" called the Captain in his best nautical shout. They covered their ears--that was a tone of voice meant for the high seas, not the crowded interior of an SUV. But sure enough, there were the red lights of a small truck just winking out over the next rise. Rashid accelerated even more--impossible as it seemed--and bounced up and down in his seat with a fanged grin of victory. "We've got you now, oldster!"

The tail-lights of the truck reappeared and drew closer very rapidly until they were upon them.

They screeched to what, in relative terms, seemed like a complete halt. The soft, ambient white noise of sand blowing against the side of their vehicle could once more be heard over the rushing wind of their passage. This old guy wasn't much of a driver. They pulled into the opposing lane alongside him and Rashid rolled down his window; the man was sitting with two fingers on the wheel, leisurely smoking a thin cigarette. The radio was blaring an especially irritating mixture of Egyptian oldies and fluctuating static. He turned his wrinkled face and squinted at the car next to him.

"Can I help you kids?" He twisted the volume on the radio down a few notches.

"Right. Where's the pig?"

"Pig... I don't know anything about pigs. They are dirty creatures, unclean in the eyes of the Prophet, peace be upon him." There was a sharp intake of breath from Katie in the back. "You don't suppose he..."

The man continued his prattling. "I've seen them up North, they look like giant rats. Those Kurds let them roam wherever they please. If we see one in Basrah, we know what to do with it."

Katie held Floyd up to the window. "Where is the other one?" she begged. He wouldn't be able to hear her from back here, and she hadn't even said it in Arabic, but she looked desperate. The old driver flicked his cigarette out the window and looked over his shoulder at the animal.

"Oh, you have one of those too! Nice, aren't they? I'm taking one home to give to my true love. I didn't know Kuwait had such pretty animals."

Rashid looked back at his passengers, nonplussed. "He's taking one home... to give to his true love. Whatever that means, I guess we know the pig's still alive. Can any of you see into the back of the truck?"

Laxman rolled down his window and stood partially, craning his neck outside. "Yes! There's something there in the corner. Did anyone bring a flashlight?"

Ali handed him the one he had been carrying since their earlier search around Camp Grain. He flicked it on and shone it into the bed of the other vehicle. "It's her! Looking a tad frightened, but I think she's OK." He sat down again as Katie cheered quietly.

"Do you think we can get him to stop?"

"How about," suggested Ali coolly, "we explain to him that Pink is a pig? It's obvious that he doesn't recognize the breed, if he's presenting her to his sweetheart. Maybe he would give her back."

That sounded far too sensible for this particular elder, but it was worth a try.

"Excuse me sir," Rashid spoke loudly across the gap, "that animal you have in the back of your truck is a *pig*."

The senile old man shook his head and *tsked*. "Don't be silly. Pigs are dirty and black and bristly. This animal is smooth and beautiful, oh so beautiful! My true love will be so pleased!" He raised his bony hands in rapture, staring at the horizon for a few seconds, then grabbed the steering wheel again when his truck began to deviate from its course.

"He's a loony!" the Captain said, agape.

"I am *not* a loony!" he shouted back in English. They all stared. Apparently that was the one English phrase he knew.

"Alright, can I run him off the road now please? I promise I'll do it safely," Rashid pleaded. Yasser didn't have much faith in anyone's concept of 'safe' forced diversion, least of all Rashid's--and especially with a target this mercurial. It might be too late for that anyway. He spotted the flashing yellow lights spanning the road up ahead even before the Captain bellowed another deafening nautical cry. "CHECKPOINT, DEAD AHEAAAAAAD!"

The old man frowned across at them disapprovingly and turned the static-laced music broadcast back up to full volume. "No need to shout, I'm trying to listen to some music here."

Chapter Twenty

Red Tape

This wasn't a time of night one expected to see much traffic on the highway between Southern Iraq and Kuwait, but that was probably the very reason the Kuwaiti military had decided to operate the checkpoint now--nobody on any decent business would be driving the stretch at this hour. Three bored soldiers sat on plastic chairs outside the sandblasted concrete hut, playing Kuwaiti checkers on a cloth game mat, their rifles leaning against the wall. Thank God at least this checkpoint wasn't manned by the Americans, Yasser thought. Still, the fact that the Kuwait Army was regarded by most as little more than a punchline didn't mean they weren't still screwed. The soldiers got up from their game with great annoyance, a gust of wind blowing the checked mat off the table and scattering wooden pieces as they rose. It was evident in their reactions that this wasn't the first time it had happened. One of them delivered a vicious kick to the hapless piece of plastic furniture, sending it bouncing into the road. The three approached Yasser's truck.

The old man had pulled into the single lane of the checkpoint first, blowing the truck's horn long and loud. Yasser strained along with his friends to hear what was being said. Right now the guards just seemed to be trying to get the old man to turn off the radio.

"They're going to find Pink, aren't they?" Katie whispered.

Ali tapped Rashid on the shoulder. "Please tell me your wasta can get us out of this."

He shook his head morosely. "I'm afraid not, the military are just so damn self-important. Nothing impresses these guys unless it outranks them. I never bothered to make those sorts of connections, the whole organization is such a joke anyway.

That's why they end up manning middle-of-nowhere checkpoints like this in the first place."

One of the soldiers, who was wearing a fur-lined jacket that didn't look military-issue at all, walked around to check the back of the truck.

Yasser tried to think up a plan, any plan. Heroics would seem to be in order now. "I bet I could sneak around the side and cause a distraction of some sort."

His companions didn't look too impressed with that one. He brainstormed some more. The soldier in front of them was shining his flashlight into the truck's bed now, gesturing at the other two to have a look.

Ali poked the Captain in the side sharply. "Take that helmet off at once! These blackguards are liable to shoot on sight if they see you wearing that thing!"

The Captain grudgingly pulled off the soldier's helmet he'd found in the junkyard and wedged it between his arm and the seat, shielding the spot where he'd been poked.

"Nobody has anything more useful they scavenged out there by any chance? A weapon or something?" Yasser grasped at a few straws.

"I do!" the Captain remembered. "I don't know how useful it will be, though." He drew an impressive folding knife out of his jacket and snapped it open, displaying the fearsome blade.

"Nice find. Maybe I can, I don't know, throw it or something. Then they'll think they're under attack," he suggested optimistically.

Rashid was sitting upright now. He opened his own jacket and pulled out a lumpy green hand grenade, like something straight off the set of an action movie.

"Maybe this will do a better job of convincing them."

The Captain dropped his knife.

The checkpoint guards had obviously decided that whatever the thing in the

truck was, it was *not* on their list of permitted livestock. The soldier in the fur-lined jacket was trying to capture Pink, but they could tell she wasn't letting herself be taken easily. He dodged from one side of the truck bed to the other with comical jerky movements, grabbing and stumbling several times. He picked her up once, but the pig twisted free and gave him a nice kick on the way down. The old man had left his seat and was berating the troops audaciously from the side of the road.

"So grab the truck and drive when you hear the loud bang, right? You can pick me up a little further back," Yasser instructed.

Rashid gave a thumbs up. "No problem. It's a toss-up whether these suckers will run off to see what the noise is or just run inside to hide under the cot, but either way we should be able to split."

Yasser returned the thumbs up--it just struck him as the right thing to do in this situation--and climbed over the seat to join Katie in the back. She offered him her flashlight, but he held up his hand in refusal. This time he was definitely going to do things properly. He checked through the front windshield to see if the coast was clear and then opened the rear hatch just wide enough to slide through to the asphalt below. Katie pulled it shut with a click.

The five companions sat in tense silence, waiting for the sound of the blast. It looked like one of the soldiers was ready to give up on the animal in the truck, but his mates were feeling vindictive. One had dragged out an old wooden crate that they intended to get the pig into, having no better luck than before. He held it up expectantly shouting for the guard in the fur-lined jacket to throw the elusive prey inside while he scrambled clumsily in the truck bed. The old man was in a blind rage, yelling and stamping his feet at the tormentors of his 'beautiful animal'. Finally, the third soldier had had enough.

To the horror of the companions in the car and the piteous wails of the old man, he grabbed one of the rifles leaning against the side of the hut and tossed it to his mate in the truck.

Yasser scampered over rocks and small emaciated shrubs, trying to judge the right distance from the checkpoint and angle to the road for his diversion. He crouched as low as he could while running, making hardly a sound, thankful for the all-consuming darkness. This job was a cinch for him in simple terms of stealth, but the stakes were quite a bit higher than the average. All for a *pig*, no less. He could feel the grenade bumping against his leg. Still hard to believe that was actually what it was--he'd find out soon enough, anyway. He arced in the direction of what looked like a nice ninety degree angle from the checkpoint and tried to judge how far he could throw the explosive. That had never been one of his strong points. A round silhouette far ahead of him--not a bush after all--wandered a few feet to the right. It must be a sheep, strayed from the flock; this presented an interesting opportunity. Surely this area had been cleared of mines years ago, but nobody completely trusted that certification around here, and livestock stumbling on well-hidden munitions were not all *that* uncommon. Poor sheep, it wasn't hurting anyone out here, he kind of felt sorry for it. He stopped to consider whether this was really worth the sacrifice. To hell with it, these sheep were the ones screwing up the desert in the first place. "*overgrazer*," he muttered under his breath and pulled the grenade out of his pocket. A loud pop rang out from back at the road; it took him a second to realize it was a gunshot. He pulled the pin from the grenade and threw it towards the unsuspecting sheep with all the accuracy he could muster, running in the opposite direction on an intersection path with the road without looking back to see the result.

The blast was even louder than any of them had expected, not sounding the least bit like any explosion from a movie. The man who had just shot Pink tripped over the rear hatch of the truck in surprise and fell roughly onto the asphalt; he scrambled to his feet and rushed to join the other two soldiers who were already grabbing their own guns. They disappeared from view around the side of the concrete hut, shouting to each other in panicked voices. Swinging flashlight beams receded into the darkness. "Go!" hissed Rashid. The Captain jerked on his door handle, scrabbled at the lock, opened it at last and hit the road at a run. The old man was tottering back to his truck with a profoundly bewildered gawk. He swung open his door uncertainly, not sure whether it was time to get in or not. The Captain solved the dilemma for him by leaping inside and slamming it closed, twisting the ignition, and backing out into a U-turn. By the time the ancient smuggler noticed something was wrong once more, both vehicles were roaring off to the south.

Chapter Twenty-One **Waxing Exceedingly Wroth**

Yasser jumped out onto the highway waving his arms. The Captain hit the brakes and stopped a few feet short of hitting him. He jumped in breathlessly and leaned back, heart pounding, as they screeched off again.

He took a few seconds to catch his breath. "Who... who got shot?"

"The bastards killed Pink!" the driver informed him, pounding the seat with his fist.

"That's... bad. Katie's gonna be pissed."

Katie was indeed pissed. After they had put a few kilometers between themselves

and the scene of the shooting, the endless stream of profanities she was uttering from the rear of the SUV finally slowed to a trickle.

"Shit." She climbed over the seat into Yasser's spot between Ali and Laxman. "Shower of gullwhackers, they're not even worth worrying about. I hold everything and everyone in this country responsible for that pig's death. Buncha wannabe soldiers." She climbed up to the front seat where the Captain had been sitting.

"So," mourned Ali, "our plans are effectively razed to the ground, right? Pink's entire nascent dynasty falls with her, and their beautiful kingdom of Grain as well."

Rashid laughed a bitter laugh. "Eloquent as ever, Ali. So now we go back, clean up camp, and head for home. Then what?"

"We raze Kuwait to the ground as well, if it were up to me." Laxman was sick and tired of being the sensible one. Katie and Ali looked at him with a little surprise, but Rashid just kept staring at the road.

"Funny you should mention that..."

The two in the truck entertained no hopes of catching up with the others as long as Rashid was driving, but they assumed the plan was to meet up back at Camp Grain. Or was it the ruins of Grain now? Yasser's usual wont in these situations was to start thinking about piecing things together and not worry too much about what had already happened, but right now all he could see was that silhouetted sheep. He'd blown it to pieces, and for what? It was a sacrifice for a lost cause--it and the piglet. They were victims of that greatest enemy of all: mundanity. They had not been snatched away by some evil villain, they had been pointlessly killed by circumstances involving a desperate and confused old man and a couple of incompetent border guards trying to fulfill the meaningless rules set by the bureaucracy of this country. How was either one a noble death? All the Grainites

and their dreams of building their own life had been defeated by the mundanity that gripped all of Kuwait like a creature with a million claws.

"I could really do with some Jackson's perfume right now," the Captain commented and rubbed his eyes. The sun would be up soon, and it had been one hell of a long night.

A muffled ringing noise came from inside the Captain's jacket. He felt around in surprise and pulled out his dark blue mobile phone. Here on the main road they had some coverage, apparently; they hadn't thought about trying that. He tossed the phone to Yasser without even looking at the number.

"Here, I can't stand talking and driving at the same time. If it's not someone from the other car, please be very rude to them for me."

"Uh... hello?"

"Rashid here. So you made it alright, good."

"Sure."

"I guess you know what happened to the pig then."

"Yeah."

"We're kind of mad about that over here. Do me a favor, ask our friend the Captain what he thinks about a little revenge."

"Ok...ay..."

"Catch you later."

Five minutes later Rashid's mobile's polyphonic ringtone system began playing the first few bars of a popular hip-hop track. He picked it up off the dashboard.

"Well?"

"That sounds like a workable idea."

"Good, we'll plan it for the night after tomorrow. Ali here says he has another idea for tomorrow night, something about giving Kuwait one last chance to prove its worth."

"What?!"

"I know, that's what I said. I guess it's

worth a shot. Stranger things have happened."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Six Last Chances

ON THE FOURTH NIGHT

* * * * *

"O Prince of True Believers, my story is one which, were it graven with needle-gravers upon the eye corners, were a warner for whoso would be warned and an example for whoso can take profit from example."

--The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night; translation of Sir Richard F. Burton

* * * * *

Katie drove Rashid, Laxman and the Captain down the Gulf Road, on the left the towers of downtown and on the right the facade of the Amir's Palace gleaming a radiant white in its magnificent festival regalia. Even the stately palm trees that lined its grand entrance were wound with strings of white lights. The legendary Amir's Diwaniya looked to be in full swing, priceless chandeliers and frescoed ceiling visible through the high windows of the annex. It all looked much different now that she knew of its imminent fate. Okay, it wasn't settled quite yet, there was still tonight to decide. But she had a good idea of exactly what Ali had planned for the trial, and she couldn't see much chance for a surprise judgment.

She thanked Ali silently for setting tonight's meeting time at eleven o'clock; they had all needed plenty of time to rest after *last* night's debacle. She had never slept for so long at one stretch, her shutters down and room pitch black until almost evening. Her three house-guests had managed the same sleeping on the couch and armchairs in the living room. Laxman and the Captain claimed it was far more comfortable than the back room at the coffee shop, but Rashid had made just a few of his usual sardonic comments. The wiseacre would have to handle it for a night or two, his family already thought that he was off to the UK to stay with some friends for an indefinite length of time. Now the four were cleaned up, fed and refreshed, and they had even had an hour or two to scan through some of Ali's 'homework reading' in between giving out handfuls of candy to the gangs of children who had been incessantly ringing the doorbell all evening.

Tonight was the first and busiest night of

Gurgian, the popular festival that marked the middle three nights of Ramadan. Ali claimed it had started out as a time for alms-giving, but now that begging was officially banned in Kuwait and there were few in serious enough poverty to need to resort to it anyway, the holiday had morphed into a children's festival roughly analogous with the American Halloween (minus pagan undertones.) Roaming packs of Kuwaiti children in fancy clothing swarmed the streets with their Asian caretakers, asking for sweets in return for another hearty refrain of the monotonous Gurgian carol. Katie still had that damn tune stuck in her head.

She did a U-turn and pulled up next to the huge mounted *dhaw* that Ali had described, standing proudly with flags snapping in the wind across the tarmac from the point where the Gulf Road met its namesake with only a chain-link fence separating road and sea. The enormous complex looming behind the grounded ship looked like some grand project that had been abandoned long ago, or possibly never even completed.

"*This* is the National Museum?" Katie asked incredulously. Rashid opened his door and jumped out, eyeing the ruined edifice with its gaping windows open to the wind and sand.

"It was in nineteen-ninety. They never rebuilt it after the Invasion--now the building itself is the only exhibit. Kind of stupid if you ask me, but as propaganda it's brilliant."

He waved to someone. It took Katie a second to spot Ali and Yasser, waving from the top floor.

The inside of the imposing museum was unreal--Katie had heard a lot about Iraqis and looting, but these guys had really taken the process seriously. The beam of her torch showed nothing but dusty grey concrete and a few hanging electrical wires; absolutely everything else had been

stripped off or unscrewed more than a decade ago. They walked up the wide staircase, crumbling bits of cement crunching underfoot.

"Huh, I wonder if any of the exhibits from here were looted again in Baghdad this year," mused Laxman, elbowing the Captain pointedly. The Sri Lankan runaway was dressed in a new *kurta pajama* he had hurriedly bought from a shop in Mishref as something of a disguise; he'd never worn such an outfit before, but seemed to be warming to the style. The Captain showed no such concerns about being recognized, even though he must know many more people in this part of town. Katie wasn't sure whether to believe his offhand remark that 'his friends weren't the type to rat him out.'

Ali waved again as they reached the top floor. From here the wide, glass-less windows looked out on three sides over the Gulf and the market area of downtown Kuwait. Nice location, Ali. "Peace be upon you!" he welcomed cheerfully, "Yasser and I were just standing here wondering if this place is what the rest of Kuwait will look like after we're done with it. What do you think?"

That comment seemed a bit harsh to Katie, but the Captain was definitely in the mood.

"I wager so, the greedy bastards are going to take all they can pry loose off to Europe with them. The guys I know in the shipping business are going to be livin' it up for a couple months, har har!"

"Could be," Yasser said calmly, "but that's not the attitude we're trying to take tonight. It's Gurgian, it's supposed to be a happy occasion. Did everyone read their Thousand and One?"

Laxman handed the four ring-bound printouts he was carrying back to Ali. "As many of them as we had time for. I liked the one about the donkey a lot. Some of the phrasing was highly entertaining."

Ali set his old leather briefcase on the

windowsill and shuffled the four returned volumes along with the six already inside, trying to sort them back into the correct order without setting any down on the dusty surface.

"Now you see why I read Burton's translation. The newer ones may be more faithful to one version or another of the text, but only a 19th-century British Orientalist could make it sound so good. The bookstore doesn't sell it, so I was glad to find it on the Project Gutenberg online library. Even if it weighs a ton printed out like this, at least I can print new copies when certain volumes wear out--on the University's ink, of course. I've gone through four Volume Sevens so far, ha ha." He snapped the briefcase closed and turned around. "So you know what we'll be looking for now?"

Katie knew. She pointed at the briefcase, then to the view of city lights through the window. "That... out there?"

"Precisely. We're going on a little Gurgian walk, but we won't be asking for candy or alms. We'll be asking for stories."

"And we're going to hear something truly heartwarming that will redeem this city in our minds and stay our hands?" Rashid asked somewhat sarcastically.

"I'm not saying we will, but at least we can say we've given them a sporting chance. And given that invisible force which guides us a chance to reassert itself."

"So we're looking for a sign," Laxman stated matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I do believe you've got it. Call it social tasseography. But we won't go about it in any haphazard fashion, we're laying down the rules for ourselves and Destiny both."

Ali walked to the Eastern windows and indicated a nearby stretch of slightly narrower-than-usual streets, some covered with metal roofing, where many people were walking and surveying small shops. It was one end of the *souq*--Kuwait's old and still bustling marketplace, so expansive

that it didn't even have a name beyond the word meaning 'market'.

"If there are any stories still to be found in this city, they are in there tonight. The *souq* shall be the playing field for our little contest."

They all nodded agreement. A contest, eh? This might turn out fun.

"We enter the *souq* each on our own. You must find a person--unless they find you first--and ask for a story. You may search around all you wish for the best candidate, but you may only ask one individual, and if *you* are approached by a talkative stranger then consider them to have been sent by Destiny to be your target. As for the story, there are restrictions on that as well. First and foremost it must be true, and it must belong to your target him or herself. You know the calibre of tale you're looking for from the Thousand and One: something unique and amazing. Something you wouldn't expect to happen in modern Kuwait, in other words. I've spent ages searching for such tales here, and this is the absolute last time I'm going to do it before giving this city's soul up for dead. We will meet back here at one o'clock. Is that all clear?"

Rashid was the only one not nodding; he raised his hand instead.

"What's the prize?"

"If any one of us wins, Kuwait lives on. Is that not motivation enough?"

"No. If this is going to be a real contest we should have a prize."

The Captain let his rucksack slide off his shoulder carefully. "I agree with the smartass for once. If we want Destiny to take our game seriously we need to do it right--and I have just the thing in my bag."

He unclipped the canvas top and withdrew a bundle of plastic bags and cotton wrap. Stripping off the layers, he unveiled a small but perfectly preserved clay cuneiform tablet. Katie and Yasser merely gaped, while Ali just about fell out the window.

"Where... what... is that real?"

"Oh yeah, fresh from Iraq. A couple of

refugees traded it to me for a boat lift to the city. Don't ask me what it says, but I think it will serve as a good enough trophy. I don't have a use for it anymore." "Absolutely, I'll play for that." Ali was practically drooling, the seriousness of the contest he was coordinating forgotten momentarily at the sight of the cyphered relic. Katie should have guessed Ali would be the one with the cuneiform fetish; he must have a couple copies of the Epic of Gilgamesh in with all his other printouts somewhere.

Tearing his eyes away from the clay slab and recovering his sense of ceremony, the contest-master returned to the issue at hand. "We have a consensus on the Captain's tablet as the prize, then? Fine. Good luck and good story hunting to all." After one last contemplative look over the city, the group left the cuneiform bounty wrapped up in the sandy corner of the room and walked down the wide stairs. They separated at the front gates of the shadow-painted museum courtyard and followed their own paths towards the *souq*, mentally preparing themselves for whatever sort of epiphany Destiny might choose to spring on them tonight. There was a chill in the sea breeze and the mid-Ramadan moon was perfectly full; it was as fit a night as any for that kind of thing.

Chapter Twenty-Three The Story Of The Egyptian Dates

Laxman walked for a long time through the busy streets of the market, keeping a casual lookout for any likely candidates. There were plenty of people around to choose from, that was for sure. It didn't take him long to become completely disoriented in the angled streets; he'd been here two or three times before when his father had come to buy something, but it

had been a few years ago and always during the day. As a general unwritten rule, he was told, the daytime was for their kind and the night--when prices rose exponentially and many merchants changed their wares altogether--was for the Kuwaitis. That would seem to be the case now. Most of the actual shoppers he could see were Kuwaiti men in their immaculate *dishdashas* and women fully covered with their black 'abbayas, browsing the 'traditional' luxury goods and perfumes, fresh dates and somewhat-less-fresh vegetables. He couldn't help but think they would have had a better chance with this story-hunting contest during daylight hours, even in Ramadan.

He found himself at last in the fish market, water pooling on the floor from the ice melting on almost-empty marble slabs. Most of the merchants here had already sold out and gone home; the few who remained had only a few soggy fish left to dispose of from the morning's catch. There were no customers in this section at the moment. Laxman continued out a side exit, not feeling anything special about any of the fishermen. The exit he followed was obviously one used by the sellers themselves rather than shoppers--it led to an alleyway, the beaten trucks parked along it smelling of the same heady fish aroma as the market. The alley ended on one of the few wider main streets that ran through the outer regions of the *souq*. A young, small-statured Indian man in jeans and a red shirt was sitting on the curb of the street with a small plastic bag at his side, looking thoroughly dejected. Perfect.

Laxman crouched next to the miserable-looking man and considered for a moment the best thing to say and the best language to say it in. English was always a safe bet. "Hello friend, are you waiting for something?"

The man picked his head up from his knees and regarded him through narrowed

bleary eyes. "A bus. Who are you?"

"Nobody important. Just a random Tamil."

"Don't see many Tamils dressed in the Northern style." He gestured at Laxman's *kurta pyjama* disguise. Oops, he'd forgotten he was wearing that. He shrugged.

"I find it comfortable. In Sri Lanka we don't have much of a dress to call our own, at least not since the ancient days when our women went topless."

The man in the red shirt chuckled and brightened a bit, offering his hand. "Very interesting, Tamil. My name is Naz, I come from Bangladesh."

"Ah, Bangladesh! A beautiful country."

"No it's not. It's almost as bad as Kuwait, but it's only as dry and dead as Kuwait half the year--the other half the whole place floods. I can tell you've never been there."

Laxman sat down on the curb. "Pardon me for saying so, but you look like a man who's got a bit more on his mind than just a slow bus."

"You *could* be right. But that's a long story."

Laxman smiled to himself. Indra's Heaven, this was perfect. "Well? The bus doesn't look likely to show up anytime soon, and I happen to be a fan of long stories."

"Alright, if you say so. It started when I was at a party tonight, a long ways away from here at a guy's house in Surra. It was a great party, we were drinking a lot of homemade wine and there were plenty of chicks there. It had good music too, not the usual bullshit you get around here. This one American chick was following me around the whole time, talking about dates. She was crazy about dates. Someone had brought a bottle of vodka, I think he had carried it himself on the plane from Europe, it was the real thing. He was trying to figure out what to do with this stuff, he wanted to make it special since it was his only bottle but there was nothing good around to mix it with or anything. This chick says to me, 'I know the best

recipe for date juice and vodka, it's the greatest drink.' She keeps talking about this drink--an 'oasis blaster' she calls it--until *everyone* at the party wants to try it. The chick says that there is only one variety of date that works well, something called *hayani* dates. She used to use them in Egypt to make the drink, she doesn't think any other dates would be juicy enough. Everyone agrees with her that only the best will do for this bottle of vodka. They all start chanting "*hayani, hayani, hayani...*" So my friends pull me over and say, 'if you want to impress this chick go get some of those dates.' She was really hot, so I thought it sounded like an easy enough thing to do. I announced that I would go and find some dates and everyone cheered me out the door.

"So I walked to the co-op supermarket there in Surra. I don't have a car because I'm just working here temporarily, but I didn't think I'd have very far to go. They had lots of dates at the co-op, but the woman there said 'ah, this *hayani* variety is only grown in Egypt.' I said, 'Egypt!?' She said, 'yes, and they send very *few* of them to other countries. They are so juicy, they spoil very easily.' I said, 'where can I find them here?' She said, 'the only place you can look is at the big *souq*.' I didn't know how I was going to get all the way downtown without a car, so I had to walk back to the party to find a ride. I couldn't convince *anybody* to leave the party except for this one British guy I didn't know who was already pretty drunk. He had a motorcycle and he brought me on the back of it to the *souq*, we barely made it here because he was so drunk. He kept taking wrong turns and having to turn around in the middle of the road. So finally we found it and he said he was really hungry so I told him to wait for me at a *shawarma* shop, that one down the street with the lit-up blue signboard. Now I don't know the *souq* well at all so I had to walk around a lot before I found the date

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Story Of Xeno The Stone Frog

market. I don't know if you've been there but it's big, there are about eight guys with shops and they have *millions* of dates. I asked the man in the first shop, 'do you have *hayani* dates?' and he said, 'no, they grow those in Egypt only and nobody likes them here.' He pointed to a shop on the other side and said, 'maybe this guy has that type, he has some Egyptian customers.' So I went and asked him and he said, 'I have only a few, but they are very hard to find so I charge a lot of money for them. These are almost certainly the only *hayani* dates in Kuwait.' I thought about whether I really wanted these dates so badly, but I had already come so far and I really wanted to impress that chick at the party. So I payed *ten KD* for a half-kilo of them and went back to find the British guy with the motorcycle. And of course, *he wasn't there!* I asked the guys at the *shawarma* shop, 'shit, where did my friend go?' and they said 'he just ate a *shawarma* and left.' Now I'm screwed because I only brought a ten KD note and some loose change, so after buying the dates I don't have enough cash for a taxi. I'm stuck waiting here for the bus back to Surra."

Laxman was feeling as down as the Bangladeshi now. That wasn't a story, he was just complaining. If anything, it was like a party animal's version of one of those inane fables from the *Pachatantra*. He had definitely lost the contest with this guy. Oh well, Naz wasn't going to get much farther in his plans for the night either.

"I hate to break the bad news, but there are definitely no buses running at this time of night, not even during Ramadan."

"Shit."

Yasser made a beeline for the outdoor eating area of the markets, an open space bordered by everything from kebab restaurants to juice stands to Lebanese-style pizza shops. Plastic tables arranged in the area were packed with late-night diners, most of them already advanced to the stage of smoking *sheeshas* and conversing softly--with their dinner companions or their mobiles--over tiny, potent cups of Turkish coffee. A network of misting hoses bathed the space in a perpetual rain of cooling fog. Yasser had to admit he had come here with ulterior motives in mind--he was quite familiar with these juice shops. They all prepared a particular concoction that went by the rather mundane name of 'cocktail juice', which was in fact an ingenious and precise application of the immutable laws of density. He stepped up to the tall counter of one of his favorite juice joints and ordered a cocktail. The juice-smith poured half of a very tall glass full of fresh mango juice (or was he just *not* pouring the *other* half?), then carefully filled a further thirty percent with boxed strawberry juice, and topped off the remainder with banana milk from a blender. The three colorful layers sat stacked like layers of a geologic formation, their differing densities keeping them perfectly separate.

Yasser carried the filled glass to the mess of tables, a drinking straw stuck behind his right ear. Connoisseurs knew that using a straw, there were more ways to drink the three component layers of a glass of cocktail juice than could possibly be imagined. Yasser didn't really have a favorite method; it depended on the mood he was in, and sometimes it was best just to be experimental. But tonight, this was the criterion he was going to use for the selection of his storytelling candidate.

Cocktail/straw technique could tell you a lot about a person; in the days before he had abandoned the world of humanity in favor of the cats, he had made a great study out of the popular art form. He wandered through the artificial mist drifting between the tables, checking juice glasses. Most people seemed to be following the simplest method of sucking out the layers from the bottom up, or the slightly more challenging strawberry-first technique. A few chose to upset the harmonious balance of the juices and mix it with their straw into a grayish slurry before drinking it; he could never understand those types of people. Finally, near the edge, he spotted a glass in which the juice was finely marbled in psychedelic swirls of red and orange. This signified the seldom-seen wandering technique, which involved holding one's head and straw still while moving the glass in random patterns, producing a kaleidoscope of surprising tastes over which the drinker had no control. Nice. Yasser sat on the opposite side of the table with his own glass, determined to get his story before he got nervous. Only then did he look up to see who the drinker of the wandered juice actually was. A Westerner with a scraggly beard, probably not much older than Yasser himself, typing on a laptop thoughtfully. The man looked up from the screen and flashed a smile, then picked up his juice and wandered in it for a few seconds. Yasser wasn't really sure what to say, as usual. Finding someone to talk to was always a lot easier than the actual conversation. How did you ask a stranger for their amazing tale anyway?

"Do you have a story to tell?" he tried quickly, just to get it over with.

The man set down his juice and hit two keys, looking only slightly perplexed. "I guess you could say that. I'm writing a novel."

"Oh... so you're a novelist?" They must have interesting lives, surely. He'd never heard of one in Kuwait though.

"I am this month. It's sort of a contest, I have to write the whole thing--fifty thousand words at least--in November."

"That's... interesting. I'm in a sort-of-contest too, I'm supposed to find someone and ask for their story... something that happened to them in Kuwait."

"Oh, so you're kind of a reporter then?"

Yasser smiled. "I like to think so. Well... do you have a story?"

"I don't know, I haven't been here very long and I've been busy writing this novel most of the time. I was in Syria before that--some interesting stuff happened *there*."

"Sorry, wouldn't count." It looked like his attempt was bust through no fault of his own. The execution was fine, he'd just had bad luck. Blame Destiny as usual.

"I can tell you the story of my novel, but I don't imagine it would count either."

Yasser shrugged. Why not, he still had plenty of time to kill before one o'clock and he didn't want to go back completely empty-handed. "Sure, if you don't mind taking a break from writing."

"No problem, synopsisizing it might help me think. I'm kind of stuck on this part I'm writing now anyway. Sex scenes aren't really my forte."

"The name of the novel is 'Tyromancy of the Frog.' It's sort of a metaphorical title, doesn't really make much sense until you read the whole book. It's about a frog named Xeno, living in the fire-bogs of a planet called Volinon. He is a sentient stone-frog, a member of a species that has evolved an extremely hard carapace to withstand the firestorms that regularly sweep through the volatile gases of the bogs. After he is separated from his nomadic tribe in one of these storms, he sees a vision of terrible doom striding through the conflagration like an enormous demonic duck. He tells his tribal elders about his vision, but they are enraged and exile him from the group as a liar and a charlatan. He wanders the hostile

bogs for days until he reaches a sea of crystal clear water at its edge; the elders never spoke of such wonders, and he is amazed. He soon discovers--in a rather humorous scene, if I do say so myself--that his stone carapace makes it impossible for him to swim. He is following along the shore in resignation when a strange feathered creature in a boat appears, offering him a ride. This is Fleck, a kind sea parrot maiden who was orphaned at a young age by brigands and now sails the crystal sea alone with a devil-may-care attitude. As the two wanderers set out across the waters, she tells Xeno of the wonders she has seen on her voyages. He longs to visit the metropolis of Woongrad, where all races of the planet live in peace under the rule of the Praetors of Woon. They set sail for the city, but arrive to find it in a state of turmoil--mysterious attacks by giant, suicidal robots have been launched against the city in recent weeks, appearing from within the fire-bogs themselves! When the Woonites see Xeno, they try to lynch the stone-frog, but Fleck rescues him daringly and they escape through the crowded streets. The two friends hide out in an inn run by a kind-hearted old sea parrot who soon turns out to be Fleck's long-lost grandmother. She tells them that things have changed recently in Woongrad, and it's not just the robot attacks. The latest Praetor, Bulgur, has consolidated his power and is turning the city into a police state with help from the cybernetic creations of a brilliant scientist named Ffolger Trout. Soon afterwards Xeno and Fleck are captured by the cyber-police after an insectoid dinner companion betrays them out of bigotry. They are taken before Praetor Bulgur who declares Xeno a spy for the bog-dwellers. He tells his tale, including the monstrous apparition he saw in the firestorm and his theory that someone on the other side of the bogs is sending the robots through hidden inside artificial storms, but the evil Praetor sentences him to imprisonment in

his ultra-security orbital prison. Fleck is imprisoned along with him after she refuses to let them take the stone-frog alone.

"The orbital prison is dark and forbidding, and their chances of escape seem to be zero, until a tiny flying robot appears in the vacuum of space outside their window one night and communicates with them by displaying messages on a video screen and reading Xeno's lips (Fleck not having lips, of course.) It teaches them how to remove a hatch in the ceiling without setting off any alarms and they climb through to the secret cyber-laboratory of the master scientist Ffolger Trout. He is also kept here against his will, forced to invent robots to carry out the Praetor's megalomaniacal schemes. With their help he eventually manages to hack into the orbital station's computer and the three escape together amidst the chaos he causes, speeding planetwards mere seconds before the prison self-destructs. The escape pod crashes into the fire-bogs and the three begin a frantic race to reach the shore of the crystal sea before the next firestorm hits. They make it in the nick of time, a few of Fleck's feathers getting singed in the process but no real damage done. As she declares, 'feathers ain't much use to a sea parrot anyway, I wonder sometimes why we even have them!' Ha ha. But anyway, they have gained a clue from the experience: just before the abrupt beginning of the storm, they see a huge robot emerge from underwater and create the fire around itself, disappearing towards the north. Xeno's theory is vindicated: someone is using the bogs for cover, and they are launching the robots from beneath the sea! With no time to lose before full-scale war breaks out between the forces of Woongrad and the rallying bog tribes, the three fugitives build a raft and sail to Trout's city of Rolard, the cheerful home of the industrious beaver-squids. They build a submarine there

under the master scientist's instruction, and use it to track the robots back to an undersea city inhabited by an ancient race of marine elephants, believed by most to be long extinct. After a bit of espionage they learn that the city's leader, Lady Bling Fist, is planning to start a war between all of the land races and have them wipe each other out so the marine elephants can rule from the seas.

"After that it's a simple matter of Xeno returning to the united bog tribes and presenting the war-elders with evidence of the elephantine plot. His people anoint him Supreme War-Master based on his experience of the outside world and he leads them in battle against Lady Bling Fist--with help from Trout's undersea battle fleet--and they defeat the marine elephant menace after many sacrifices are made, greatest of all by Ffolger Trout himself who crashes his sub into the elephant Lady's mega assault robot. The stone-frog army returns to the bogs in victory but find that they have been taken over in their absence by the Woonish cyber-forces. Trout is no longer around to aid them, but Xeno and Fleck help the beaver-squid scientists discover the secret of the Lady's firestorm generator and use the technology to crush the cybernetic horde of Praetor Bulgur in the bogs. Woongrad is freed and Fleck elected its new Praetor (as she is now known to be a citizen of the city through her grandmother). Since the war is over, Xeno steps down as Supreme War-Master of the now permanently united bog tribes and moves to Woongrad to live in peace with Fleck, his true love. That's all really."

Chapter Twenty-Five Not The Story Of The Brat's Mother

The Captain wasn't too sure where to look. He had heard plenty of tales of derring-do on the smuggling routes, but those weren't really *in* Kuwait, and most of the stories tended to sound a bit hokey anyway. He'd once heard an Egyptian tell about having his boat sucked into a giant whirlpool off Iran and resurfacing a hundred miles away with a scum-covered old sea chest full of gold coins on the deck. When his audience had asked to see the chest, he said he'd run into the coast guard and they had taken it off him. All the stories tended to end that way; by the sound of it you'd think those coast guard guys were actually worth a damn and didn't just hang out on the beach at Bubiyan Island all day.

As he wandered through the clothing market a hearty slap on the back took him by surprise. Speak of the devil, it was Dawood and the Druze Goat.

"Hey Captain! how's it?" the Goat rasped, showing the gaps in his teeth with a grin. "Or can I still call you that?"

"We heard all about your boat," said the impressed Dawood, "Everyone did--its picture made the front page of *Al-Seyaasa* right next to Mister Bush. You've got a lot of balls if you haven't left the country yet." He waved the two off. "Eh, I know you scoundrels won't squeal. Anyway, I'll be splitting for good tomorrow."

"Well then you'd better come with us for a farewell drink. It may be your last chance to taste Jackson's perfume."

"God willing."

He sauntered out of the back room of the Druze Goat's tailoring shop some time later, dismissing his friends' protests. "Ah'm on last minute business tonight, y'll have to finish th' bottle yirselves. Fare ya well, bastards." Those two would keep

him at it all night given half a chance, especially Dawood with his reports on running his damn mob ring in India. Now there was a story he could never quite believe. He hadn't realized how sick and tired of this whole scene he'd become--even Ali and the rest with their endless philosophizing were better company, at least they made big plans. Now what was it he'd come to the market for? He always managed to forget as soon as he got here. Jackson's? No, he wasn't drinking any more of that crap after tonight. Tonight, the last night of all for Kuwait! That was it, he was supposed to find a story. He wove his way precariously through the cloth market and into the readymades, squinting at the shelves of each shop for a story. A few minutes later the street merged into the electronics area, where a few shady men sold VCDs of pirated American movies on folding tables in front of the larger showrooms. The Captain gazed through plate glass into the first of the brightly-lit stores, watching with curiosity as a man in a white mask was shot repeatedly on a large-screen, high definition TV. Not enough blood for that sort of injury, he thought. The stout, greying store manager switched the channel over to a nature show as he walked over with a fully veiled female customer. He gestured grandly at the image of some cute furry critter, magnified to a giant size on the screen, as he explained the unit's features. Another critter appeared and began mating with the first. He quickly changed the channel again in annoyance. The woman turned towards the window to look at something else and the Captain saw with astonishment that it was *her*. That's right, he'd almost forgotten he was in love.

The glass door gave a friendly electronic chime as he strode into the shop, a man on a mission. The young widow and the showroom manager turned away from the high-definition football match on the

screen and watched him cross the bright marble floor, the widow's eyes growing wide with recognition.

"Tell me a story? Please?" the Captain asked before she could speak.

"What are you talking about?! I should call the police! Ishmael was lucky to survive your mad stunt without injury, thank God. He still doesn't want to go back to school."

Of course not. The brat wasn't stupid.

"Nah, he had a great time. 'Neway, I only did it b'cause I love you!"

The widow took a step back. Was that a good sign? He could never read women.

"You're insane! You crashed your boat with my son on board because you're in love with me?!"

He heard the door making that stupid chime again behind him, but whoever the customer was left right away.

"I only charged you half price..." he shrugged.

The showroom manager stepped between them, a full head shorter than the Captain. He looked up at him angrily through little square glasses. "Sir, can you please leave? Mrs. Reema is making an important decision on a home entertainment purchase."

"No, I don't think so. Not only am I in love wi' her, she still needs t' tell me a story."

"What is this nonsense, Mr. Tayseer? Throw him out at once, I will not be insulted in your shop!" The young widow looked furious, but you could never tell with women. Her eyes were even more beautiful when she was angry, that was all he could say for sure.

"Certainly, please step over here for a quick word while Mrs. Reema considers her choice of television system."

The little fool couldn't really throw him out, of course. He followed the Captain across the floor to a back corner and spoke in a low but still angry voice.

"You *must* leave this woman alone. We can

both see she doesn't like you at all, much less *love* you. I really need you to go now, I'm willing to pay you money if you stay away from her for good."

"Wha... money?"

The little shopkeeper took off his square glasses and polished them on his vest. "Yes, it is imperative that I make a good impression tonight. You may think you love my fair Reema, but I am truly in love, in a way an uncouth ruffian like yourself cannot possibly know."

The Captain laughed out loud in the man's upturned face, causing him to flinch at the perfume smell. "You! A fat little Eypshin wi' grey hair? In love wi' a young Kwayti widow? Har!"

"Please, not so loud. And I am from Iran, not Egypt. Now, do you understand? Will you leave me to pursue my courtship?"

He thought about it for a second.

"I'll fight ya."

Mister Tayseer raised an eyebrow and placed his glasses back on his nose.

"I don't think you really want to do that. I am a skilled boxer, I have knocked out larger men than yourself with one punch."

This guy was too much. "Ha' many years ago was that, gramps?"

"Okay, fine, if you're too intimidated we won't fight. I'm not going to hit a man who's scared, and I don't want to get blood on the DVD players. Now are you going to leave my shop?"

"You rilly think she's gonna go f'r a guy like you? You muss be drunk!"

The man looked much less angry for a moment, and he actually winked. "Well, you know how it goes with these young widows in the old stories."

Huh, he had a point there--the Captain had read enough of Ali's damned Thousand and One to learn how the rich young widows of *those* times spent their nights--picking up the ugliest, poorest bastards off the streets of Baghdad for their freaky sexual escapades. Maybe Ali was right about things only having gone downhill from there.

"You reckon is' still like that?"

"I have a theory."

"You *muss* be drunk!"

The widow tired of pushing buttons on the television set and glided across the polished floor towards them. Mister Tayseer winked a few more times and whispered, "Now you know how it is, you must give a man a sporting chance. If I don't succeed, you can fall in love with her or whatever as much as you want next month."

He smiled to the widow while handing the Captain a bundle of notes behind his back. The Captain shrugged and walked out the chiming glass door. Crazy old coot.

He began meandering back up towards the clothing market, his uneven steps quickening when he remembered that he was supposed to meet with everyone back at that creepy museum place. Oops, he'd left the widow behind without getting her story. He was going to lose the contest. She probably didn't have one anyway, unless Mister Tayseer was right about these women, but then she would never tell him *that* kind of story. Unless *he himself*... no, that showroom guy was just crazy, and his 'theory' too. Never mind, At least he'd got a bit of folding money out of the whole thing. He held the bills up to the light to check out his haul. The face of Saddam Hussein smiled back at him. Shit, the little rat had passed him worthless old money! He ripped up the bills as many times as he could and threw the pink and orange flakes into the air, walking through the cloud of spinning shreds. God willing, the young widow would give the lying mole a good hard slap.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Story Of The Gurgian Pouch

There must be a logical way of doing this, Katie told herself. It was always the last place you thought to look. Yeah, yeah, she knew the joke. "Because after that you stop looking."

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing. Sorry." She hurried away from the confused mutton vendor and towards the lights at the end of the covered market. These meat shops were just depressing--they only served to remind her of her own failed attempt at the meat trade. She exited the hall of hanging carrion and found herself in one corner of the misty outdoor dining area. Following along its perimeter, she tried to focus on the task at hand. Who was the most likely sort of person around here to have a good story to tell? Definitely not these fat Kuwaiti businessmen smoking and drinking coffee--she'd talked to more than enough of them at those horrible Diwanis to know that they never, ever had anything interesting to say. It was hard to believe she had tried so hard to get into *that* culture; she was much happier now that she had made up her mind to destroy it instead. Rashid may be a crazy revolutionary, but he was right: this was a corrupt, decadent society and there was nothing beautiful about it. She didn't think so, anyway. This was her chance to find out, but she still didn't know where to look. Okay, think. If she herself were in a story, who would be the one to give her the revelation? Someone very unlikely, a beggar--nope, none of those here--or... a child! That was it! A child telling the story that saves the city; it was straight out of the Thousand and One itself. The kids were the future, the ones who had a chance to turn this place around with a renewed sense of wonder. Plus tonight was their special holiday. The idea was such a perfect one that Katie steadfastly

ignored her nagging memories of teaching maths classes to the miserable spoiled children at her school. They wouldn't be like that this time. There! A small playground stood on the side of the food court, colorful plastic slides and painted metal bars keeping kids busy while their parents enjoyed a quiet meal. Katie approached casually, surveying the fenced area for a likely mark. She counted eleven children of various ages, clambering over the shiny equipment in a Gurgian candy-induced fervor. This was a perfect idea; they looked so much more alive than the adults. She cast a wary eye on the two Filipino maids who sat at the other corner of the playground watching over their wards, and stepped over the fence into the sand. Taking her place on an empty bench, she waited for one of the children to come to her. They always did. She drew them to her like a kid-magnet, which was one reason why she had wanted to teach in the beginning, before the disillusionment had set in.

Ten minutes later, an unhappy-looking little girl of eight or nine years in age walked over and lifted herself onto the bench beside Katie. Like most of the kids here tonight, she was dressed in her special sequined Gurgian costume, purple with gold trim, minus the miniature head-scarf. She sat in silence with her head hung low.

"Hello, what is your name?" Katie ventured rather unimaginatively.

"Maysaa" she answered softly, looking up at her seat-mate. Katie smiled her best teacher's smile.

"You don't look very happy. Did something happen that made you sad?"

Maysaa nodded vigorously.

"I can be your friend and you can tell me about it, if you want," Katie said, still smiling, trying to think of what the counselors at her school would say in a situation like this. Shit, she hoped the girl's problem didn't turn out to be anything too heavy-duty. She needed a heartwarming

story, not a therapy session or a court testimony.

“Welllll...” Maysaa smiled weakly and pulled at her long black bangs. “Okay. It started when we were going out to sing songs and get candy for Gurgian.” The little girl launched right into her story and didn’t stop talking until she was done.

“My mom bought me a purple Gurgian pouch to go with my dress. The tailor made both of them out of the same cloth, so they would match. It had gold around the top like this on my sleeve, with the triangle pattern. It was pretty. Me and my brothers and sisters went out to get candy with the Omars from next door and our maid Carla and their maid too. We went to all the houses on our street and people gave us candy, even though we kept forgetting the words to the Gurgian song. Then we kept going to other streets because we wanted lots of candy. Our maids didn’t want us to go too far but we kept going anyway, even across the big road. Some of the younger kids got scared because it was dark, but I didn’t. I remembered seeing it before in the car but I never saw it before from outside. Then my brother Walid bumped into me and I dropped my purple pouch and some of my candy fell on the ground. I picked it up but then everyone had gone and I didn’t see where they went. I was pretty sure which way it was to the big road and to my house though so I just started walking home. My pouch was full of candy already so I didn’t care if I didn’t go with the others. They went too far anyway, the maid got in big trouble when they came home. We’re going to get a new one soon, my mom says Carla is not dependable enough. But when I started walking home I went down a small walking road between two houses to get to the big road and it was kind of dark. Then I saw an Indian boy walking the other way and he was carrying a white bag like at the grocery store but it wasn’t Gurgian candy it was something else like

vegetables. He stopped and made a friendly face and pointed to my purple pouch. I think since he could only speak Indian he couldn’t get his own candy because he wouldn’t be able to sing the Gurgian song. I didn’t want to give him any of mine because I didn’t want him to touch my purple pouch with his germs and I knew he would just take the chocolate and the best candy anyway. I picked out some nuts and gave them to him because some people mix nuts with the candy and they are yucky. The Shiraz family on our street usually *only* gives out nuts so we never go there, it’s so stupid. So I gave him some nuts but he didn’t want them, he just wanted candy. So I gave him some of the boring candy that I got from some Westerners like you who always give boring cheap candy, but he didn’t want it either. I told him he was stupid but I don’t know how to say it in Indian. He kept pointing at the bag and saying stuff so I just started to walk away in case he tried to take it off me. I could hear him walking behind me and I started running a little and then I tripped over some trash that was in the road between the houses and I fell and scratched my hand right here. I got up and ran the rest of the way, but when I got out onto the side of the big road my purple Gurgian pouch was empty because there was a hole in the bottom and all the candy had dropped out. I don’t know if it got torn when I fell down or if the Indian boy had done it. I didn’t want to go back in the dark street between the houses so I just walked home. I told my mom what happened and she gave me all of our own candy that was left but it wasn’t as good because there was almost no chocolates. And she didn’t fix my purple pouch either, she said I didn’t need it now and she would get me a new one next time it’s Gurgian and it can be any color I want. But I’m still mad because my brothers and sisters and the Omars laughed at me for getting my candy stolen by an Indian.”

Maysaa sniffed. Huh, that had almost started to get a little heartwarming, Katie thought, but... no. Still, maybe there was some hope yet. Time to get all school-counselor.

"Do you feel mad at the little Indian boy, Maysaa? Or do you think maybe it's kind of nice that he got to have some candy too for Gurgian?"

The girl hit the bench with her fists. "I want to call the police so they can put him in jail. And I want to go back to my cousins' house in England where they don't have stealing Indians everywhere."

Katie winked and stood up in the sand, still smiling like a teacher.

"It was nice to talk to you, Maysaa. I have a feeling you might be going to visit your cousins again very soon."

She stepped over the fence and began circling around the diners again, thinking about getting a cup of tea. That had been a really lame idea in hindsight, she thought. Children are the future, hah. Anyone who said that in an optimistic way had obviously never been one themselves.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Story Of The Doomed Slovenian Forest

This was so silly, but whatever. Rashid would humor the others in their game, even though he knew well enough that none of them could possibly find anything worth saving in this place. The wastamancer knew every corner of the city and the forces that ran through it, visible or invisible, and none of that was 'precious' or 'beautiful' in the slightest. Ali was even more of a wild-eyed romantic than he'd given him credit for, dreaming up such an idea! He gave the leisurely automatic sliding door of the air-conditioned gold market a helping kick and walked through, glowering at the

decadent window displays glittering under spotlights. Let Ali and the others figure it out for themselves; *he* would have trashed the place years ago if he'd known how easy it was. All this time he had convinced himself that he was hungry for power, but that wasn't it at all. He couldn't bear the thought of actually *running* the country. It was only the more destructive implications of revolution that had ever interested him, along with a vague idea that whatever came next would have to be better than this insanity. Now, with the Captain's bold idea, there wouldn't *be* a 'next'. That, too, would be an improvement.

Rashid recognized most of the handful of late-night shoppers in the gold souq, and he wondered briefly whether he should try to stay out of sight. He was supposed to be in the UK right now, after all. Nah, even if someone did mention seeing him to his father, what would come of it? Not that his father wouldn't be a little confused at the inconsistency. He just wouldn't care enough to let it worry him. It had been a short conversation when Rashid had told him he was leaving for a while; the old fool hadn't even asked what city or what university he was going to. He wondered if the reaction really would have been any stronger if he'd said, "Bye dad, I'm off to destroy the city with some friends. Don't wait up for me when you're evacuating." No, he probably still would have answered, "May God watch over you!" and sent him away as if he'd been a minor business contact.

Rashid passed an open shop and checked who was inside through a window displaying a ludicrously expensive wedding set. Oh wonderful, if it wasn't good old Omar Al-Maysarah, buying gold jewelry for the wives. What an ostentate! Rashid wasn't the least bit sorry he'd missed his Diwaniya the other night. The old man was fidgeting with his prayer beads, looking highly bored with what must be a

long shopping process. He noticed Rashid at the window and, seeing a chance for escape, grinned and stood up. He motioned for his four veiled wives to stay and exited the shop. The salesman hurried out with a pair of plastic stools which he set in front of the window and returned to his sale. Omar sat with a long sigh, twirling his prayer beads thoughtfully.

"So, my good friend Rashid! I hope you are having a generous Ramadan. How are your mother and father?"

Rashid perched himself on the other stool. Might as well humor him, maybe he'd have a story to tell for the contest. Hah!

"Very well, thanks to God. The wives out shopping for some new Eid jewelry, I see?"

"Yes," he laughed, "they never have enough. I wouldn't mind if it didn't take them half the night to pick something out, and the other half to bargain on the price. Does your family have big plans for Eid too?"

"I'm sure they do, but I'm not going to be around then. I'm off tomorrow to the UK for my studies."

"Really, that's good. We go to London every year for the shopping, my wives think it's the greatest city on Earth but I can't stand the weather. And the people are so unfriendly, it really is a closed society. Still, I'm sure a young man like you could have a great time in such a city." "I hope so."

The gold merchant brought out another stool and set out a tray with two cups of tea, hurrying back to his counter. Apparently the sale inside was going to take a while longer yet.

"By the way," Rashid asked, "how was your Diwaniya this week? I tried to come but I got stuck in that traffic jam on the Gulf Road where the boat crashed."

"Oh yes. That was quite a sight, my nephew Saad's car was one of those damaged beyond repair. I heard the driver who did it may have been an Iraqi, and it may not have been an accident," Omar

said confidentially.

"Really?" Could the Captain be hiding something from them?

"Well, that's what someone at the stock market told me. He said it was being covered up by the Americans, but the real story was on the internet. Then he said that the kid they found on board was actually a genetically engineered biological weapon sent by Saddam Hussein to assassinate the Amir. I find it very frightening if it's true. That man will stop at nothing."

"Riiight. So... everything going well with your business then?"

Business was not really the word for it. All these old retired fools spent their days playing the world markets, but they sure as hell didn't need the money. It was the national sport more than anything else. He was really asking for it--get one of these guys on the subject and he would never shut up.

"Funny you should ask, I happen to have some very interesting deals going on. I'll tell you about it, but don't go spreading this around..." Omar glanced around the hallway warily. "It's for your education only."

Sure. Whatever.

"I took a trip last month to a little country in Europe called Slovenia. I doubt you've heard of it, it's small and there's not really anything there. The countryside is popular with tourists but the people are very backwards. They even eat horses! I was just looking for investment opportunities, of course, and the country's drawing a lot of interest from the Far East because they're going to be joining the European Union soon. I was the first from Kuwait to look into it and I found definite opportunities there--because they want to get into the EU they've been loosening restrictions and deregulating all across the board. What I found most interesting was their forests. I heard that they have barely touched them in the past, and there's a

fortune in lumber to be made there. I found a new startup company in Ljubljana called N.E. Razumem and bought about fifty thousand KD of penny stock in it. See, when the government removes restrictions on logging in a few months--which they're going to have to, everyone told me so--the company's going to be worth millions. When I returned I spread the word so that others could get in on the remaining stock and raise its stature, giving it a better chance on contracts when the forests open up. Even your family has been buying it, and I promise they're going to be very happy they did. But here's where it gets good: the best timber in the country is in the Triglav National Forest, and it's definitely going out the window. I know these men who run this N.E. Razumem company and they are scoundrels; when they get in there they won't leave even a single little bush standing. This is where the second part of my plan comes in. There is another company, it's a much more successful one right now, called Razglednica--or something, their language is impossible to pronounce. It operates hotels and restaurants, tourist stuff, especially in this Triglav forest and other nature areas. Everyone's investing in the tourist companies now because of the EU thing. They think the tourists are about to start pouring in. But these Easterners never look at the bigger picture. When the forest is all cut down, the tourists go too. There was a Japanese man staying at my hotel who had come to invest in tourism, a real Eastern fool. I told him that I didn't like the Razglednica company's prospects, but I didn't say anything about the logging. He kept arguing with me about it, but I just said that I thought the owners were lazy. Finally on my last night at the hotel he challenged me to purchase a five-year naked put option in the company from him. He set the strike price at more than *six times* the current value of the stock. What an idiot, I couldn't believe my luck. I

purchased as much as I could goad him into writing and that was that. Now when N.E. Razumem clears out the forest and Razglednica tanks in the next few years, I'll have double the winnings. Is that not a beautiful thing?"

Omar drained his tea in one long sip as he eyed Rashid expectantly over the glass.

"Sure, that's... brilliant! You're really going to clean up."

Rashid hadn't the slightest idea what a 'naked put option' was, much less whether it really was as brilliant as the old Maysarah seemed to think. The master trader had reminded him very effectively of everything he most hated about this place; the money, the wheeling and dealing, the politicking, the wasta peddling. His only regret now was that these jargon-spouting wankers were almost definitely going to ride out the fall of Kuwait, to carry on with their tricks somewhere greener. Probably make a killing off it, too.

Chapter Twenty-Eight The Story Of The Bright Jinniyah

It didn't take Ali long to remember that he hadn't broken his fast tonight; in fact, he'd neglected to eat at all since their meal around the campfire last night. Those sorts of minor things were so easy to overlook in times like these, when great plans were afoot. After having to stop and sit for a minute by the museum gate while he let his head return to its proper place on his shoulders, he decided that his first order of business must definitely be to partake of some suitable victuals. He eschewed the crowded food court full of mobile phone chatter and pushed deep within the *souq* itself in search of a nice quiet cook-house of the traditional variety. The streets were oddly quiet tonight, but he was too hungry to give the observation much thought. He walked on, trying to remember where his

favorite spots were located. Most of the restaurants, found on the second stories above the shops and reached by narrow, ill-lit staircases, catered to the South Asian community, but there were a few scattered in between that offered Arabian, Yemeni and Levantine cuisines. Keeping his eyes upturned, Ali beheld the glowing sign of a place he'd never eaten at before: Jameel Restaurant, Arabian by the looks of it. This must be a new place.

If it was new, they sure did a commendable job of disguising the fact, Ali thought to himself as he entered from the narrow stairway. It looked positively ancient, dimly lit and strewn with musty old carpets. It was a marked improvement in Ali's mind over the well-scrubbed tile floors and harsh fluorescent lighting of most other places around here. He may have just found a wonderful new dinner spot; it was a shame that it would have to go along with everything else, if their plans for tonight failed. That reminded him--this also looked like the perfect place to find a good story. There were a few other diners clustered in the dark corners, and they gave him the impression of some salty sea-dogs or caravan masters swapping wild tales in their *khan*. Wow, it was hard to believe this place was really in Kuwait! Before he could wonder further, a veiled woman appeared from the back room and gestured for him to take a seat.

"A generous Ramadan to you," she greeted him in a soft voice. His table and chair in the corner were of heavy wood, a far cry from the plastic furniture of other restaurants in the *souq*. He no longer had any idea what manner of food this place might have to offer, so he just asked the veiled woman for a meal of whatever was best tonight. She nodded and glided away over the carpets without a sound.

He was still trying to figure out how he had missed this place in the past--had they only recently purchased a new sign for

outside?--when the serving-lady returned, carrying in one hand a tray bearing fragrant dishes of rice and meat. She set the mouth-watering food out before him and he set to work on it at once. It was every bit as delectable as Ali had expected, not too fancy but thoroughly delicious. Forget about the story, this restaurant was almost enough to redeem Kuwait on its own.

"Did you enjoy your meal?"

The serving-woman cleared the plates away and set the tray aside on a neighboring table, again using only her left hand.

"Indeed, very much so. This is an exquisite little place you have here. Has it been around for long?"

The woman sat down in the chair opposite Ali.

"Oh yes, a long time indeed. But that is an equally long tale to tell."

Was this truly happening? There could be no mistake that Destiny had finally stepped in once more; he had only partially believed that it could happen tonight when he had come up with the contest idea, but here it was.

"Fine, tell your tale, let it take as long as it will."

She stood again, moving silently as ever.

"This is not the place. Follow me."

He followed after the black apparition in a daze, through the back hallway and the warm, aromatic kitchens--he was surprised to see no cooks there--to a wooden door beside the oven. The woman opened it with a large key and they passed through into a carpet-covered apartment that looked closer to a cave than a room. A single light-bulb illuminated the small space and the carpet-draped ledge built into the semi-circular wall. The woman took a seat on one side of the ledge, Ali on the other. To his surprise, she removed the veil from her face. She was ridiculously beautiful, pulchritudinous even, he thought, if perhaps not to the point where

couplets of poetry would begin to spontaneously pass through his head as always happened in the Thousand and One. She still did not speak, just stared into his eyes with her ravishing gaze. He became far more surprised as it dawned on him that the woman's skin was glowing softly. No, it wasn't just a trick of the light, it was becoming brighter to the point where her face shone like a flame, outshining the light-bulb with a pure white light that made her features difficult to distinguish. Ali wasn't going to question why any longer; this was just the sort of thing he'd been waiting to see happen for a long time. The shining woman spoke with a mysterious, magical voice.

"Know, stranger, that I am an immortal *jinniyah*. I have lived in this town since before humans began to settle here, when there were nothing more than a few fishing boats to disturb the peace and loneliness of the desert. In those days I took the form of a falcon so that I might survey my domain in peace. But when the desert tribes came here to build a town over three hundred years ago, one of their trappers captured me and brought me before his Sheikh. He, the first of the Sabah leaders of Al-Qurain, had never beheld such a splendid falcon as myself and he vowed to keep me and train me for hunting. Although I was already an ancient and powerful *jinniyah*, I had never been so near to man and I became intrigued by their odd ways. I did not make my escape, though I could have with minimal effort. Instead I obeyed the Sheikh for my first few days of training, until he became exceedingly fond of me and could not bear for me to leave his side. One night he kept me on a perch beside his bed in his palace as he slept. I decided then to give up my wings and enter the world of man. I transformed myself into the shape of a woman and woke the sheikh. He was amazed and delighted when I revealed that I was his beloved falcon transformed into

human form, and he took me as his wife with all haste.

"We lived in the greatest happiness for years, but I soon discovered one fact about man that I had not known before: that like other animals, they are mortal. At this I began to wax more and more fearful with dread that my husband too would die. As the town and the tribe of Bani Utub grew, the intrigue among the lower Sheikhs grew as well, until I became convinced that my husband's life would soon be plotted against. As much as I disliked leaving behind the world of man that I had grown fond of, I begged my husband to pass the leadership of the town on to another member of the family, with instructions to pass it to our eldest son once he came of age, and steal away with me to a secret place of which I knew. I transported him that night to a group of caves beneath the desert and told him that this would be our new home. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "But it is so dark! I cannot see a thing!" I made myself bright to illuminate the space and pledged to him, "As long as I am in these caves and you do not wish to sleep, I shall illuminate my body thus. If you stay near to me at all times, you shall be able to see without difficulty." Thus we lived for many more years, furnishing the caves with beautiful treasures from all parts of the world.

"But alas, no matter how hard I tried to keep my love safe, God must take all men in the end. He died finally of that sickness for which there is no cure, old age, and I wept most bitterly. I built a splendid tomb for him in the largest of the caves and left one of my hands there, keeping the cave forever bright for him as I had promised. Afterwards I became very lonely and longed to return to the town of men, Al-Qurain. I magically transported one small corner of our underground palace with me that I might never leave it far behind, and around it I built a cook-shop. The greatest

skill I had cultivated during my years with the Sheikh was in cooking, and I put this to use so that I may meet all people of the town and hear their stories. Through the centuries, as the town grew and changed until it was a city, I moved my restaurant from one place to another, keeping the section of cave always at its heart. In this room I still live, honoring my vow to brighten myself whenever I enter it. I know that you may not believe it to be so, but there are still those people in this city with stories to tell, and they all find their way to my restaurant sooner or later. Thus my study of the ways of humanity in this city continues, until such a time as I may be reunited with my love."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Prize

It was five to one in the morning. Katie and Yasser picked their way through the darkness at the edge of the market towards the square frame of the museum that blocked out the stars ahead. It hadn't been nearly this dark before, Katie wondered, had there been street lights on or something? Why turn them off halfway through the night? The evening had still been in full swing back in the market, where she'd run into Yasser and that creepy writer guy. He had offered to tell her all about the novel he was working on, but Yasser had dragged her away with a quick apology that they were in a hurry to meet up with some people.

A hollow clattering of metal and a *meow* told her that a cat had joined them--no surprise there. She looked around and couldn't see it or hear it anymore, but it was most likely still there, drawn by Yasser's mysterious cat-powers.

"Where are all those cats anyway, the ones from last night?" She wanted to make some conversation to fill the silence out

here. Yasser probably wasn't the best companion for such a task.

"You mean the Tribe of Thirty-Six? They're all kind of camped out near my flat for the night."

"Wait, you just pronounced 'tribe' and 'thirty-six' with capital letters, didn't you?"

"Umm... maybe."

"Hah, nice. I like the sound of it. Will the Tribe be accompanying us on our cruise tomorrow?"

"I think so. If there's room for all of them."

Katie tripped over a piece of metal post in the dark, but recovered quite nicely.

"Oh well," she said, "it's a pretty big ship. Besides, anyway, the more the merrier."

At least there was a pool of light at the gates of the museum. And there in the middle of the pool, sitting with his back to the wall, legs and long white garment sprawled out in front of him, was Ali. Katie kneeled and shook him until his eyes opened. He looked around, confused, then straight up at the light that illuminated him. He frowned a bewildered frown.

"You forgot to break your fast, didn't you?"

He bit his lip. "No... I had a huge, delicious feast... so delicious..."

"Before or after you sat down against this wall?"

"Oh. Yeah, I got a bit dizzy."

"I'll bet you didn't sleep much yesterday either, right?"

He hung his head in dejection. "No, not much."

"A potent combination. Great, you passed out and slept through the contest. Don't worry about it, you didn't miss much."

"But the *jinniyah*... she told me a story! the kind of story..."

"The kind of story you really wanted to hear? The kind you *dream* of hearing?" She rolled her eyes. Ali rose unsteadily and blinked back the remaining tendrils of sleep.

"Okay, you're right." He sighed

mournfully. "It really was beautiful. I don't suppose a story I heard in a dream can count as our sign?"

Katie and Yasser both grabbed his arms to keep him upright.

"No dice, not with your imagination at least. The contest rules don't clearly *exclude* stories told by low-blood-sugar hallucinations, but it's sort of implied."

"Feel free to *dream* about not destroying Kuwait though." That was a surprisingly witty comment for our Yasser, thought Katie. They both laughed.

"Alright, are you planning to stand there mocking me until I pass out again, or does anyone have some food with which I can fortify myself?"

Katie pondered. "I brought a snack in the car, but I don't think you'll be interested. It's a pork sandwich."

Both men looked at her, faces stamped with horror. "You didn't!"

She shrugged innocently. This was fun. "Don't look at me like that, it wasn't much but it was good, tender meat. No sense in wasting it."

"That's barbaric!" Yasser exclaimed.

"Hey, I'm not the one who *shot* her. I didn't bomb any sheep either for that matter." That shut him up.

"Whatever," Ali sighed. "Anyone have anything to eat that I didn't know personally?"

"Okay, beyond the Pink sandwich it'll just have to be a couple chocolates and some mango juice, and you can hope for real food after the others get here. I'll just be a sec, go ahead on up." She handed Yasser her torch and went to seek out her SUV around the better-lit Gulf Road side of the museum.

She was pleased to see Rashid and Laxman approaching with their own torch as she returned to the gate with the food; she wouldn't have to walk up the railing-less stairs in the dark now. Laxman waved.

"What have you got there, visual aids for your story? Not fair!"

She laughed and held up the snacks. "No, just some food. Ali missed *Iftar* tonight, and came out the worse for it."

"He did, did he? Well, I've got something for him too." The Sri Lankan lifted a small plastic bag. "I'm not a big fan of dates myself, no matter what the variety. He's welcome to them."

Rashid held the torch for the three of them as they entered the ruined museum and climbed the sandy stairs once more. The other two were sitting on the windowsill in their previous meeting spot.

"Uh, Ali... is that *really* the best place to be sitting when you're feeling faint? Better 'fortify yourself' sooner rather than later."

She handed him the bag of leftover Gurgian chocolates and one-liter plastic jug of mango juice. Laxman offered him the dates as well. He peered into the bag, eyes widening, wobbling precariously on the windowsill.

"Well well, *hayanis!* Are we celebrating something, Laxman?"

The Sri Lankan fidgeted. "No, someone gave them to me. I would rather he had given me a good story though."

"No luck then? And it appears that Yasser and I both came away with only fictional stories, although his sounded considerably more thrilling than mine. The prize is still up for grabs. Anyone else?" Ali popped one of the *hayani* dates in his mouth thoughtfully, tossing the stone out the window behind him.

"Afraid not," Rashid answered, "same old thing. Naked puts and deforestation."

Katie frowned likewise. "I got a spoiled rich kid who lost her candy. There may have been a little poetic justice involved, but nothing too stellar. The cockles of my heart didn't feel a thing. Sorry Ali."

He sucked the stone out of another date and threw it out the window morosely. A faint "gah!" of protest drifted up from below, followed by a few random curses. Ali turned and looked down, thankfully holding tight to the side of the window.

"Looks like Kuwait's last shining hope has

arrived. Someone go bring him up.”

They could tell by the Captain’s heavily perfumed smell, if nothing else, that prospects were not good. He leaned on Laxman with bleary eyes, but at least he seemed sober enough to remember what this was all about.

“Bullshit,” he proclaimed, confirming their suspicions. “You?”

All five shook their heads in resignation. So that was it then, the contest was a bust. So was Kuwait. If the Universe didn’t actually want them to go forward with their plans for demolition, it must have simply given up caring strongly enough one way or the other to be bothered to do anything about it. Lazy freaking Universe, that’s what it was. The Captain left Laxman’s shoulder behind and staggered over to the darkest corner of the room, retrieving his cuneiform tablet and stripping off the layers of wrapping noisily. He took his place at the gaping Northern window next to Ali and stared out over the black band of the Arabian Gulf. Stretching the last layer of transparent plastic enclosing the tablet until it tore open, he held the rough, ancient slab of baked mud in his hands. He stared at the deeply stamped letters on its face as if he could now, finally, divine their meaning. Katie could tell that this was killing Ali, but he knew what had to be. A trio of late-night drivers zipped past on the Gulf Road as the Captain launched the relic in an arc over the tarmac and chain-link fence with a mighty swing. Three consecutive waves of Doppler-warped engine noise covered the sound of the splash.

Chapter Thirty The Last Diwaniya

ON THE FIFTH NIGHT

* * * * *

My lord, King of the Universe, the fig harvest in the ninth year of your glorious reign has been most exceptional. Thus I send this bullock-cart laden with the finest figs harvested from my principality, that they may be given in thanks to the god Shamas in the great temple which you have built for him. May the seasons of figgy bounty continue for eternity under his shining blessings! Take care to ensure that the sacrifice is made in all promptness, and leave it not under guard even for one night lest the soldiers be tempted to partake of that fruit which is meant for Shamas. Your faithful servant, Zug-Polaan.

--The Captain's

Tablet

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The six companions lounged around the cushioned circle of Katie's dining room set with laden plates, open foil dishes of fragrantly-spiced mutton, vegetables and rice spread out on the coffee table between them. It had seemed like a good idea to go for the entire Ramadan feast tonight. This was a special occasion, and it would have either been this or pizza. The apocalyptic feeling in the air tonight pervaded every action; the companions tossed their bones carelessly on the Oriental carpet, where Floyd rooted through them in oblivious joy. The pig was just living in the house now. Everything was so much different when the home you were in was about to be abandoned, not to mention the whole city. That was the energy that kept them wide awake and alert tonight, despite the fact that they hadn't slept more than an hour or two with all the preparations to be made. Laxman couldn't quite come up with a name for the emotion; it lay somewhere midway between excited elation and brooding, dark melancholy. No, that didn't make sense even to him. He had more reason to be in high spirits than most--he was about to depart for the land he had always known to be his eventual destination. He had easily convinced the group that after performing their deed, the distant coast they would aim for should be India. They and their boat could disappear so easily there, into the crowd of a billion, and start their real lives. It would be a true reincarnation into a place where he belonged. So why did his mind still hold such contradictory humors?

"Does anyone else feel a little... dark?" he asked the room, pushing an eggplant chunk around his plate. "Not regretful, just a bit sad."

Ali held up a finger sticky with rice grains--he claimed he hadn't used silverware in

years. "A wise man once told me that every beginning is also the end of something else. He said that the break of dawn may be the start of a fresh new day, but it can also be the end of a *truly* groovy party."

Rashid laughed, choking on a mouthful of mutton. "What kind of wise man was *that*?"

Ali seriously lifted his old pocket watch out of his *thob* with his unsticky left hand. "The man who sold me this, at the Friday Market last year. I guess when you're a watch repairman you spend a lot of your day thinking about the mysterious ways of time. I hear it's a profession highly prone to suicide."

Katie reached for a plate of another, whiter meat on the end table at her side. They all lost just a little bit of their appetites.

"One might likewise say that the end of a little pig is also the beginning of a delicious roast," she said in a mock British accent.

"I still can't believe you're eating Pink. Is that the last of her?" Ali inquired queasily. Katie just smiled and held a small piece of the meat out at arms' length over the carpet.

"If you keep complaining I'll give Floyd a taste too."

The pig trotted across to her and looked up at the morsel longingly. They all cringed in revulsion, except for Rashid, who flashed a wicked grin. Katie sat undecided for a moment, arm extended, then shrugged and popped the piece of pork in her mouth.

"Nah, that's just wrong. Floyd's too young and innocent, look at him. I can't do it."

They all ate what they could, leaving the remainder out on the floor for the pig to rummage through. Katie and the Captain both spread out flat on their respective couches and sighed.

"So what else needs doing before we head out?" the Captain asked to nobody in

particular. "Both boats are set to go, with all the supplies I listed for you?"

Rashid looked to the heavens. It had been a battle to convince the fugitive to stay at home rather than coming with them on their repeated trips to the docks today.

"Yes, I told you, we found everything and it's all on board. Food for humans and cats, bedding, more than enough fuel to get us across the Indian Ocean..." He pulled the crumpled list from his pocket and looked over the scrawled handwriting. "Fishing tackle, a shitload of padlocks, a couple monkey wrenches... Oh, no Jackson's perfume. I refuse to have any of that stuff around. I got you a box of whiskey instead."

The Captain's look of dismay turned to a crooked smile. "Ah well, I think I can manage. How about rope?"

"Yeah, enough to hang a dozen elephants. I still don't see what we're going to do with it all though."

The Captain waved a finger from his reclined position. "You can never have enough rope. We'll need it, just wait and see. Maybe not as much as we would if we were sailing a dhow, but still..." He chuckled heartily. He was never going to let Ali live down *that* suggestion. "And the other boat?"

"Just the jetski strapped down in the back," Rashid answered. "I hope it will be heavy enough, it was the largest boat I could manage to borrow on such short notice."

Yasser had stayed with the Captain through the morning, helping him search through the vast resources of the internet for relevant information. He spoke up.

"It won't take much, as long as it's moving fast enough. I'm sure our Captain won't have any problem with that."

"You got that right. Let me drink enough of that whiskey beforehand and I'll make the boat come out the other side!"

Ali stood up. "So we're all ready to proceed then? Or are there any more

computer tutorials we are required to sit through?”

Yasser frowned--he'd spent most of his afternoon putting together the instructional slide shows for the others, complete with sounds and animated text. Ali wasn't being fair; if it wasn't for Yasser they would never be able to understand all that maritime jargon. At least *he* had been given an easy job, Laxman thought. Padlocks were easy enough to wrap one's head around. He stood along with the others. It was definitely time to get moving. He asked silently for kindness from the gods and help, as always, from the Remover of Obstacles. If they ever actually reached India, he was going to have to remember to go on a long pilgrimage or two to make up for all the aid he had been taking these last few nights. They pulled on their various jackets and sweatshirts--it wasn't as warm tonight as it had been, and out on the water it would be downright chilly. “No worries,” said Katie, and opened the front door to a horde of staring yellow eyes. A few of the cats came in to pick through the remains of the meal, but most stayed out in the front garden as if ready to go. They also seemed to have picked up the sense of expectation in the air.

Chapter Thirty-One The Flying Carpet

The *Flying Carpet* cut through the smooth black surface of the sea, leaving behind a narrow but foaming wake, heading northeast at a forty degree angle to the coastline of Southern Kuwait. The city lights glowed in the distance up ahead invitingly, but they wouldn't be getting much closer than this. The Captain sat in the big, cushioned leather seat at the wheel. The top deck was glassed in and climate controlled like most of the enormous yacht. For now, however, the

air conditioning was switched off and as many windows and doors as could be opened were, allowing free rein to felines and sea breezes alike. A dozen or so cats milled around on this deck, vying for a place next to the three humans who stood to the port side windows, looking ahead to the city lights in something like a silent farewell. Something like it, but with a hint of malevolence. Katie was sitting cross-legged on a stack of heavy blankets piled against the starboard corner, monkey wrench thrust in her belt, wearing an eye-patch. Floyd the pig sprawled out casually next to the blankets, sporting an eye-patch of his own. They couldn't get the Australian to stop talking like a pirate.

“Yaargh, this be a fine sturdy vessel for a long voyage and a bit o' plunderin'! Where be its master?”

The Captain shook his head and tapped the backlit color display on the global positioning unit screwed onto the dashboard. Rashid had programmed it earlier with a waypoint using the icon of a green tree. He hadn't explained why he had deemed that particular symbol appropriate for their rendezvous spot.

“He's still a ways ahead. This is a useful gadget for some things, I guess. I see now why the smugglers all have 'em these days. I never needed one myself just to find the islands and the city docks. This whole boat is a bit over the top actually. I can't imagine the Sabah kid piloting this monster. I don't even know what half of these controls do.”

He flipped a lever experimentally; no detectable change resulted from it. He tried turning a little tiny wheel, and again there didn't seem to be any effect.

“I swear it's all there just to make the pilot feel important.”

“Does Rashid actually drive it very often?”

Laxman asked. “It sort of belongs to his family, right? As he's going to be driving it tonight I hope he knows what he's doing. This thing is the size of a house!”

Ali laughed suddenly. “I think we will all

be worse off if he *is* used to piloting it. I'll bet he drives a boat like he drives a car!" Everyone groaned. It was a frightening thought.

There was a scattering of other large private boats here closer to town, brightly lit and more often than not with music pumping. Most of them were just drifting in place while their passengers feasted and danced in floating Ramadan parties. The most happening vessels rocked slightly in the water. The *Flying Carpet* gave them all a wide berth, the Captain trying to stay inconspicuous. It had been smart of Rashid to have them depart with the boat from his family's beach house slightly south of town where nobody was around to see them loading up their supplies or casting off. Rashid himself had been fine to set off with their other, borrowed vessel from the Ras Al-Ard harbor in Salmiya; in that boat's case the intention *was* to be seen.

"Shiver me timbers! I don't like the looks of those other seascum out there on the..." Katie paused and looked around. "Which side be the starboard?"

Laxman tried to fill her in. "It's the opposite of..." he turned to the Captain. "What's the left side called again?"

"Port."

"Yeah, it's the opposite of the port side."

"Aharr jim-lad, I says I don't like the looks of 'em."

Ali was digging into one of the many bags of snacks they had brought along in the cargo hold. The cargo hold was actually a spare cabin below decks, but one of them--Katie, most likely--had taped a piece of paper to the door with '*Cargo Hold*' written on it with a black marker, so that's what it was now. It was a nice thought, but so far nothing on this ship was showing any inclination to stay where it belonged. Ali pulled out an apple from the bag and bit into it with a crunch. Katie stood up from her stack of blankets and crossed the

deck with a grimace, brandishing the monkey wrench over her shoulder. A few of the weaker-nerved cats scrambled to get out of her path.

"Alright me bucko, hand over the loot right quick an' everythin' will be shipshape." She reached into the bag and pulled out some 'loot'; Ali showed no sign of resistance. "Aaahhrr. You made the right choice, I'd 'ave 'ad yer guts for garters if you'd held out on me."

"Belay that kind of talk!" he retorted. "I would never be so foolish as to stand between a fearsome sea rover and her cat food. Now why don't you sail out on deck and stand sentry duty or something, keep all the seascum at bay."

Katie dropped the bag of cat food with a final "Aaahhrr!" and exited the cabin, minus loot.

"What is happening with her tonight?" Yasser asked, somewhat vexed. "Doesn't she think any of this is serious?"

Ali shrugged and took another bite out of his apple. "No worries, as they say. Some people just react to stress or fear like that."

"By turning into pirates? Weird."

"Hey, you can't blame Katie for being an Australian. She can't help it."

The object of their concern came rushing back into the cabin a moment later.

"Rashid's boat ahead! I mean, ahoy! Forr'ard bow! Is that right?" She looked to the Captain.

"Yeah, perfect. I saw him already."

They pulled up alongside the other boat, only slightly smaller than the *Flying Carpet*, and their resident pirate did the honors of throwing a rope over. Rashid picked up the soaking wet end after her fifth attempt and tied it off. As their own lights illuminated the bow of Rashid's borrowed boat, the Captain saw with deep amusement that it was named the *George Bush* and sported bold American stars and stripes along its sides. Damn, that was so perfect it made him want to cry. The name was probably that of the Senior, the 'Great

Liberator' of popular myth, the *Abu-Abdullah*. He couldn't be sure, though. The boat looked disturbingly new.

"Ready to swap?" Rashid strode into the cabin, eager as ever. "I can take care of the pirate crew around here."

The Captain stood up from the wheel and rushed for the door. "Thank God. Send them all to bed, why don't you? It'll be another hour or so from here to Kubbar." Rashid hopped into the well-cushioned bucket seat and took the helm, flipping switches and turning knobs until he was satisfied. Damned if he knew what any of it was for, but a little adjustment never seemed to hurt. He watched through the window as Katie and the Captain untied the two boats, then he pulled away into a wide semi-circle with a wave. Once underway, he reset the GPS to guide him to the waypoint for Kubbar Island. He turned his head over his shoulder and nodded to Ali, Yasser and Laxman, who were still standing against the windowsill surrounded by sleeping cats.

"What kind of snacks you got in there? You heard the Captain, we've got a long ways to go still. I'm hungry."

"Cat food and apples in this bag. Don't ask me who packed it." Laxman tossed an apple to the helmsman, which missed completely and bounced off an important-looking row of buttons. Floyd ambled across the cabin, tracked down the fruit into the corner where it had rolled, and crunched away at it noisily. Yasser tried a shot, with much better results. Rashid snatched the apple out of the air and started eating.

"Wellll, I think our esteemed Captain's parting words were wise indeed," Laxman yawned. "An hour of napping is just what I need if I'm going to be much help with the sabotage." He left the cabin, climbing the stairs down, the other two going behind him. All but a few of the cats awoke and followed the group out as well. At the helm, Rashid rubbed his eyes, took another bite out of the apple, and flipped a

switch back and forth. The wind was getting cold out here, but he didn't want to shut the windows--he needed it to keep him awake. Maybe what he really needed was some tea from downstairs. He should have asked before everyone deserted him. The adrenaline would kick in once they reached their target, but until then the starry sky and invisible horizon weren't going to be too exciting. The pig Floyd, still wearing his ridiculous eye-patch, lay down on Rashid's feet with a prolonged grumble and went to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Two Sinking The Bucephalus

Kubbar Island was a desert island in the finest cartoonist tradition, a speck of sand atop a tiny outcrop of coral off the coast of Kuwait. All it was missing was the single coconut palm, instead sporting a man-made substitute in the form of a mobile phone service relay tower. During the day--in other months of the year, at least--there were usually several boats anchored around the islet, day trippers picnicking on its miniature beach. It was too far out to be popular for an evening excursion, though, even during the greatly-extended evenings of Ramadan, so the shallow water over the little reef was now deserted except for the *Flying Carpet* and the *George Bush*, both floating side by side with all of their lights switched off. The city of Kuwait could still be seen this far out as a glow on the horizon, but there were also other, nearer lights visible. Closer in to the nearest stretch of coast lay one of the major oil loading terminals, where the ceaseless procession of tankers took on their loads of crude straight from the wells at Ahmadi and Burgan. Several tankers both filled and empty usually sat in the vicinity of the terminal at any one time. On this particular night there was only one ship anchored in the area, to the east of

the terminal near Kubbar. It was called the *Bucephalus*, and they had seen a mention or two of it on the Kuwait shipping news websites. Apparently after being pumped full of oil there had been some questions regarding its seaworthiness, and as all official matters slowed to a halt during the Holy Month, it was being forced to wait for its clearance papers until after Eid. Its enormous oil-laden bulk sat low in the water like another much larger island to the west of Kubbar, dark and silent, edges marked out only by a few safety lights.

The six conspirators stood on the deck of the *Flying Carpet*, putting together their equipment. The cats crowded around for a view. Laxman was taking heavy padlocks out of a cardboard box one at a time, unlocking them, tossing the keys over the railing into the sea, and trying to hook as many as possible into his belt in such a way that they would not knock together when he moved. Rashid and Ali carried monkey wrenches in their otherwise empty backpacks, and Katie brandished the Captain's found military knife in swashbuckling style. Yasser himself also wore a backpack and held a wrench; he pointed to the massive shadow in the distance with the latter.

"It's true that most of the crew will be on shore now, but I still think there are sure to be one or two left behind to keep an eye on things. I can't imagine they would really just leave it empty like that. So remember to use real stealth. Don't get too casual."

Funny, they actually listened to him in matters like these. He'd somehow gained a bit of a reputation as the group saboteur and expert in covert tactics. He hadn't realized he was so exciting.

"Whew, I'm glad I don't have to do any of that stuff," the Captain replied, "I'm not very good at being quiet. The stunt driving suits me just fine."

"Did you check the jetski?" Laxman asked. "Yeah," Rashid answered, "before we

loaded it on. Anyway it doesn't really matter, even if it doesn't start all the Captain has to do is float there. So, we're ready? Let's untie ourselves and push off." The Captain climbed onto the railing and jumped to the deck of the *George Bush*, causing it to rock and bump against its neighbor. He lifted a bag of snacks over to his side, glass clinking together within. "See you at one o'clock, again. I'll try to be on time tonight."

* * * * *

Yasser climbed up the emergency ladder at the rear of the tanker, slipping into his stealthy, cat-like frame of mind. He reached the top and craned his neck out at deck level. Seeing no signs of life, he hopped onto the deck and reached behind him into his backpack for his wrench. There were plenty of nuts and bolts around to choose from. He tried out the tool on one of the large nuts holding the end of a pipe to a wall. A hiss of escaping air accompanied the removal. Oh well, whatever that meant it couldn't be too bad for them. He turned back to the railing and dropped the nut over, not hearing the splash from up here. He lit up the face of his watch: a little over an hour to go. Fine. A lot of damage could be done in an hour if one had a nice big wrench.

He was hiding out of sight on top of the still-hissing pipe when the others reached the deck. They all jumped when he dropped from his perch.

"Woah, watch it cat-boy," whispered Rashid, "I almost went back over the side there. Let's get at it."

"Just don't get *too* into the wanton destruction," Laxman added, "remember to be back on the *Carpet* by ten to one, or you'll be stuck begging the crew for a spot on the lifeboat."

The five monkeywrenchers split up in the general directions of where they imagined their targets to be, moving as silently as

each could manage. Rashid made a beeline for the main engineering room, in search of the fuel pumps. Ali followed behind him, looking for anything labeled “emergency pumping and drainage” and laying waste to it with his wrench. Katie wandered the decks looking for water removal hoses--or any hoses in general--and sawing them to shreds with the Captain’s knife. Laxman padlocked hatches leading below deck, avoiding crew compartments and any passages marked with single chalk lines--meaning one of the others was inside. Yasser climbed into the bowels of the ship to seek out points of watertight integrity that he could breach and saltwater interchange valves to mess around with. It all could have been a lot better planned out, but since they were just trying to do as much damage as possible there wasn’t really anything to screw up. Most of their efforts were just aimed at thwarting damage control anyway, the Captain would do the rest. Rashid’s task was the most important: shifting fuel to the port side of the *Bucephalus*, giving her a bit of a list and pushing the weight of the oil filling the tanker to that side. According to the Captain and backed up by all of their research, after the *George Bush* impacted their chosen spot on the port side of the ship, it would be down on the bottom gushing oil before anyone could possibly do anything about it. Still, it was good to lock a few hatches and bust a few pumps just to be sure. If nothing else it made the whole endeavor seem so much more hands-on.

Rashid didn’t see a single sign that anyone was around on the ship. Surely they were all in the city now, trying to figure out where to buy alcohol. There might not even be anyone around to notice the ship sinking until it had already disappeared beneath the waves. Hah, that would be priceless! ‘Wait, wasn’t there a ship there last night?!’ Rashid paused to pull a panel off the wall and rip up a few wires,

screwing the square of steel back into place crookedly. Funny, he’d never thought he would end up dismantling Kuwaiti society in quite so literal a way. He continued down the passage, following the signs for the pump room. It was too bad really, for a while they had thought they could made the whole thing look like an accident, but without shifting the fuel and cargo and breaching a few watertight compartments it was all too iffy. And they didn’t want to be half-hearted about sinking this thing. If it really did go down before anyone was able to have a close look, they may still think for a while that the crash was accidental, but they would likely find the signs of sabotage eventually. Even then they would probably conclude that it had been a suicide on his part. Too bad that, unless the evacuation was *really* fast, his own family would sooner or later notice that their boat was missing too. The hope was that he would be well hidden with the others in India by that time, the *Flying Carpet* also resting on the bottom of the ocean somewhere. He hoped India would be as nice as Laxman made it sound, and not as dirty as some described it.

He found the pump controls in the engineering room at last, recognizing the machines from the pictures Yasser had showed him in his computer slide show. Pushing the levers to one side, he fastened them with the two padlocks he had brought in his backpack. *Click, click.* There was no undoing that; the keys to the locks were lying around in the coral off Kubbar now. He started suddenly at the thought, then calmed down. Yes, he’d got it right, port side was *left*. No worries. Picking up his bag, he started back towards the entrance to the engineering room where he had come in. Upon reaching the doorway he heard voices and footsteps echoing from up the passage. Not his friends. He stood frozen, trying to remember what the plan was for this

situation. All he remembered was that he hadn't actually made one. He scrambled into the shadows behind a large vertical pipe. At least the voices didn't sound excited or panicked--in fact one of them seemed to be singing--and the footsteps weren't moving too quickly, so whoever it was hadn't discovered any signs of the ongoing sabotage yet. Just some of the crew taking a walk. They didn't sound particularly alert--or even sober--so they probably wouldn't even notice the padlocked pump controls in the ill-lit engineering room. He'd better hide here until they passed, then run back to warn the others. They could head to a safe distance on the *Flying Carpet* and wait for the Captain a little early now that the pumping had begun. Through the crack between pipe and compartment wall he watched the two crewmen in overalls mosey into the room, singing lustily.

Chapter Thirty-Three The Enemy

The Captain opened his second bottle of whiskey, even though he hadn't finished the first. It was damn kind of the Sabah kid to buy him this stuff. Not cheap even for a rich Kuwaiti like him. Sure, four bottles wouldn't be enough to get him all the way to India, but he wasn't actually planning on taking that trip anyway. He had only signed up to sink the ship, not to go on any exotic journeys. He'd been fleeing from one thing or another for a long, long time. He couldn't handle becoming much more of a refugee than he already was. Besides, he hated spicy food. To top it all off he didn't even have the slightest idea how to use a jetski. They expected him to push it off the back of the boat at full throttle and jump after it or something? What kind of action star did they take him for? No, the Captain would go down with his *George Bush*.

He just wished he didn't have to sit around waiting for so long. The longer he leaned on the railing here on the moonlit red-white-and-blue bow of the yacht, the more whiskey he had to drink, and the harder it became to keep his head together. He could still remember what time he was supposed to leave--one o'clock, it was always one o'clock--but he wished they had worked out some kind of signal. Yasser hadn't wanted to take the risk, not even with a flashlight or something. They had guessed it might be light enough out here to see other boat pulling away from where it was moored against the tanker's side, but he couldn't see shit that far off. The whiskey wasn't helping in *that* either. If only he could know what was going on in there--he sure as hell didn't want to waste his one shot at this by attacking too early. He picked up a packet of *zaatar*-flavored chips off the deck at his feet and fished out the last four, folding the empty foil bag flat and sticking it in his back pocket. "No excuse for littering," he mumbled to himself. He was lifting up the whiskey bottle to wash down the chips when he remembered something: Of course, he *could* find out how everything was going with the others! Rashid had done it before in the middle of the desert, surely he could do it here. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken... He turned to look at the single mast erected at the center of flat little Kubbar Island. That was a mobile phone tower right? He pulled his mobile out of his jacket and searched for Rashid's number. Arty, Dari, Ceej, Joanna, Shagga... what the hell, where'd he get those numbers from? Never mind, here was Rashid's, right where one of the others had programmed it in for him on that first night when he'd been even more drunk. He hit the call button. The bastard had better pick up.

* * * * *

The two crewmen had just passed out of sight through the door at the far end of the engineering room when Rashid's mobile started up its polyphonic hip-hop tune. The shock alone blasted him out of his spot in the shadows. He barely touched the ground before he was at the wall next to the exit. Too late, they were coming back. He ripped the phone off his belt and mashed at the buttons frantically. It fell silent. He looked up at the two large overalled men approaching him with unsure looks stamped on their faces. His heart was racing, but his mind was even faster; as always in tricky situations like this, it slipped into *wasta* overdrive. It would take an insanely powerful act of *wastamancy* to get him out of this, but that was his best chance. It would have to be a swift and decisive blow.

"What is all that noise?" he almost shouted. "Are you two drunk? In the engineering rooms?" He held up the mobile. They were right where he wanted them, in confused silence. "I was just calling up Mr. _____ at the KOC to give him my report on this rust-bucket's seaworthiness. Do you want to be included in it?"

The pair mumbled something about 'doing their rounds' and stumbled for the door, bumping against each other. Wow. It had worked. He thought he might have been a little too aggressive at first, but these guys were drunk and alcohol made everyone weak-willed, force was just what was needed. They may not even have known the name he used if they were with the shipping line and not the oil company. He started breathing again and switched off his mobile before anyone tried to call again; stupid of him not to do that in the first place. Oh well, he'd beat them once again. He really was a *wastamancer*. It was kind of too bad that they were about to make the discipline obsolete.

Halfway up the passage to the deck, footsteps echoed from ahead once more.

Too far up to hide anywhere this time. All he could do was hope it was one of the same guys and that they would scare just as easily the second time around. He continued walking boldly forward until he met up with the tall man. At first he thought it was Ali--he was wearing the same style of old-fashioned *thob*--but he was larger, taller and more mature, with a well-shaped mustache, and the garment was of blue fabric. This was definitely no crew member either. He regarded the interloper with the wary, wily look of a government minister. Rashid lashed out with his *wasta*, using a different technique. "Ah hello, did Mr. _____ send you as well? He told me there might be someone else from the Company coming along. Mind helping me check the seals down there for the report?"

The tall man didn't move. He just smiled.

"No, I'm afraid he didn't. My name is Fadi Bin Fahad."

Rashid didn't know the name, but the force of powerful *wasta* stood behind it, solid and unmistakable.

"A generous Ramadan to you, Fadi Bin Fahad. And may I ask who you *were* sent by?"

The *wasta*-steeled words pierced Rashid like six daggers and drained him of his will to resist. "Abdul-Muiz Ibn Husaam Al-Sabah."

Who? He didn't know of anyone with that name in his family! If it weren't for the more-than-tangible power in the name, he would have thought it an amateurish attempt at *wasta* forgery.

"I... don't know who..." he faltered, almost physically stunned by the assault.

"I didn't think so. You are not familiar with the Shadow Assembly or its Prime Minister. Come with me please."

Rashid followed the man out to the deck, completely cowed and broken. He'd been beaten by a master.

* * * * *

Ali, Laxman and Katie sat on a single bunk in a cramped square room that looked somewhere between a cabin and a closet. The hatch was a lot heavier than one would have expected for that sort of thing, though. It was unlocked noisily from the outside and Rashid entered with the man in the blue *thob shillabat*. Their friend walked over and stood next to them avoiding their coded glances. He was right; you just didn't try that sort of thing with a guy like this. Ali hadn't the slightest notion what was going on. He had been busy causing grievous harm to a particularly complicated pumping system, just noticing that the deck was starting to list a bit to one side, when this guy had come up behind him. He'd brought him here to this... 'lockbox', the man had called it, where his two friends were already being held captive. And now Rashid. Ali smiled inwardly; the noisome snake wouldn't have such an easy time catching Yasser, that was for sure.

"Yes, the brave saboteurs are reunited. Did you have a good time?"

Rashid looked helpless, so Katie took the rebellious role for him. "You bet. Feel how the deck's leaning? This tub's going down. Not bad for amateur work."

"Oh yes, I'm sure you made a nice mess, but it's just not that easy. Even children like you should know better. This ship is going to have a terrible time getting its certification now, but the repair crew will come to fix it all up tomorrow. The police will also be here then to escort the would-be terrorists away. Don't waste time thinking about an early departure, your boat has been cut loose." He turned away and grabbed the hatch handle. "Amateur work is right. I'm a bit disappointed, in fact." He slammed the lockbox shut behind him as he exited.

Rashid sat heavily on the floor. "What the *hell* is the 'Shadow Assembly'?"

So that's what they called themselves, eh?

"It's not anything official, that's for sure,

or he would have had the police with him instead of promising to send them round in the morning," Ali conjectured. "Sounds like some manner of secret society. Unfortunately for us, they would seem to have Kuwait's best interests in mind vis-a-vis oil spills."

Laxman looked askance at him. "You seem very composed and talkative considering we're in a... *lockbox*."

Ali gave his finest shrug. "I've just encountered something I've never seen before in this country. A real, live, honest-to-God villain."

"Yeah, and he's turning us over to the authorities."

"And how! Locked us in a room, left us to our own devices for hours, after exposing far too much secret information about his group. It's perfect!"

They could see what he was getting at now, and they looked too worn out to argue.

"Can you imagine," he continued in growing excitement, "Secret societies, a Shadow Assembly, strange mustachioed men in antique dress. In *Kuwait*! They must be ancient, maybe a splinter of the Assassins. Or the hidden descendants of one of Sheikh Mubarak the Great's two murdered brothers! They could be *jinni* for all we know!"

"Wait..." Rashid sat up a bit straighter. "What you said about Mubarak. He did mention the name of a Sabah I've never heard of... Abdul-Muiz Ibn Husaam, I think..."

"*Abdul-Muiz Ibn Husaam*! Son of the sword! See? He is perfect. He is our nemesis. We have a *nemesis*!"

"So," Laxman asked, "you're saying we should escape and fight back somehow? I'm sure they are long gone by now, and he said they cut the *Flying Carpet* loose."

He considered the thought for a moment. It certainly didn't look like it was going to be very easy getting out of this cramped prison. "Maybe, if that's how the story goes. Don't forget that Yasser's still out

there, they had no chance of finding him. They don't even *know* about him. Maybe he'll set us free, or maybe he'll be the one to fight back for us, but I'm not so sure. I think I've already worked out how this story ends. No worries, we win."

"How?" all three of his companions looked at him, finally caught up in his excitement.

He pulled his old Russian pocket watch from inside his *thob* and held it up dramatically. A dull, pounding thud resonated through the walls of their prison, right on cue.

EPILOGUE

* * * *

The wavelets lapped cheerfully against the sides of the boat, as they had done for many days. The Abbess basked in the warmth of yet another sunny afternoon. Not a cloud in the sky. She stretched and wiggled her ears around, yawning wide. White fur was a wonderful thing. She could lie out here all day and not overheat. Lucky, since there wasn't a whole lot else to do out here. She could see her darker-coated mate Sparrow sitting over there in the shade, taking a break from the sun with Mighty Paw and the others. The young kitten Ears Of Destiny made a bid to join them, but Fleece batted him away; whatever they were discussing was obviously too important for the disruptions of a young one. There had been much discussion since the humans had disappeared, taking the Uniter with them, on their first night on the boat. Some deemed it an act of treachery, painting the humans as malevolent demons in their tales, but the Abbess had her own ideas; Perhaps they didn't need the Uniter any longer. Perhaps He had left them of His own will, judging the Tribe of the Thirty-Six finally capable of continuing without His guidance. His job was merely to unite them, to gather them from their lonely, oblivious existences and illuminate them with the spark of thought, bringing them together into a Tribe which was greater than any one cat had ever been. They had not understood at first. They had been as kittens, opening their eyes for the first time. But even kittens knew to watch and learn.

The Hairless One ran past, squealing, chased by Ears Of Destiny. Just having a bit of fun, but she must have a word with the kitten about not harassing the poor

animal. It was not alive as they, yet some of the Tribe believed that it had simply not found its own Uniter and must be treated as an equal. Anyway, it had proved an invaluable ally in breaching the entrance to the great Cargo Hold. If it had not been for the bounty within, praise the Uniter, they would have all run short on food many days ago. As it was they were going to have to start rationing before long. The Abbess stretched again and closed her eyes. None of that was worth worrying about right now. What was she anyway, the Queen of the Tribe? No, of course not, they were an anarcho-syndicalist commune. She wasn't even the executive officer for the week. That was Maagi, poor thing.

Her sun-soaked reverie was cut short by a shudder that ran through the body of the boat. Uh oh, could be trouble. She was on her feet instantly, sprinting to the front tip of the deck ahead of the others. Wet sand stretched out before them, smooth and white; tall, impossibly green trees rose beyond. It smelled unlike anything the Abbess had ever smelled before.